

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: FACT, FICTION, AND FABRICATION: HISTORY,

 NARRATIVE, AND THE POSTMODERN REAL FROM

 WOOLF TO RUSHDIE

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While most accounts of Western attitudes towards history in the nineteenth century suggest that Victorians had a faith in its origin, teleology and meaning, twentieth-century assessments of history more often suggest the opposite. Both poststructural theory and postmodern historiography in the wake of Hayden White's *Metahistory* present a relativist view of the possibility of either objectivity or material referentiality in historical discourse, particularly through the medium of narrative. From this perspective, historical narrative is defined as a discursive creation that obscures the material relations of its production and as an instrument of ideology and oppression.

“Fact, Fiction, and Fabrication” investigates what political and ethical repercussions this attitude towards and theorization of history has and how much contemporary fiction typically labeled “postmodern” both initially reflects and ultimately denies this model. This study argues that the assessment of contemporary postmodern fiction as reflecting poststructural models of endless textuality denies an important element of the novels studied: their commitment to the possibility of accessing material reality and the importance of such access both for the construction of an ethics and for political agency. By looking closely at contemporary novels that explicitly theorize history and historiography, it becomes clear that they instead insist on a sense of the “real” at least in part because of these political concerns. These novels, which I label “postmodernist historical fiction,” insist that although an inviolable origin, teleology, and even consistent referentiality cannot be obtained in historical reference, there can be a provisional referentiality and access to the real without a return to the classical history of foundationalism, immanence and teleology that contributes to hegemony. These texts are also tied together by their deployment of nonnarrative methods that counter the deformation of the real that takes place within narrative discourse according to White, among others. The primary texts considered are Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.

FACT, FICTION, AND FABRICATION:
HISTORY, NARRATIVE, AND THE POSTMODERN REAL FROM WOOLF TO
RUSHDIE

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	iv
Introduction: “Memory as Forgetting”: The Problem of the Postmodern in Kundera’s <i>The Book of Laughter and Forgetting</i> and Spiegelman’s <i>Maus</i>	1
Memory and Its Politics in Kundera and Spiegelman.....	7
History, Memory, and Collective Memory.....	15
Kundera and Postmodern Memory.....	25
Spiegelman and Postmodern Memory.....	39
Kundera, Spiegelman, and the Problem of Ideology.....	62
Postmodernist Historical Fiction and Finding the Real.....	72
Notes.....	99
Chapter I: The Pageantry of the Past and the Reflection of the Present: History, Reality, and Feminism in Virginia Woolf’s <i>Between the Acts</i>	112
The Picture and the Portrait.....	114
The Woolfian Artist and the Relativist Historian.....	125
The Pageant, Patriarchy, and Deconstruction.....	130
Irruptions of the Real.....	149
Narrativity as Reality and the Problem with Plot.....	159
Bergson’s Present and Woolf’s “Moments of Being”.....	180
The Pageant and the Present.....	190
The Pageant and the Present (Take 2).....	202
The Absence of the Present and its Presence.....	210
Plot’s Return.....	216
Notes.....	222
Chapter II: “Swamps of Myth...and Empirical Fishing Lines”: Historiography, Narrativity, and the “Here and Now” in Graham Swift’s <i>Waterland</i>	237
The Progress of the Atkinsons.....	248
Process and the Cricks.....	262
“A Knife Blade Called Now”.....	284
Curiosity.....	305
Reproduction, Representation, and the Reality of the Real.....	311
Notes.....	324
Chapter III: “What’s Real and What’s True”: Mahatma Gandhi, Errata, and the Shadow of the Real in Rushdie’s <i>Midnight’s Children</i>	332
<i>Midnight’s Children</i> , Postcolonial Historiography, and Class Politics.....	337

Mistakes and Lies.....	343
Literal Metaphors and Metaphorical Truth.....	356
The Epistemology of Metaphor and Fictional Worlds.....	368
“What’s Real and What’s True”.....	381
Narrative and its Leftovers (Ectomies and Turds).....	399
Gandhi and the Ethics of Inclusion.....	410
Notes.....	429
Conclusion: Ethics, Universality and Postmodernist Historical Fiction.....	444
Works Cited.....	459

List of Figures

1. Excerpt from *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale/And Here My Troubles Began* by Art Spiegelman, copyright © 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991 by Art Spiegelman 51
2. Excerpt from *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale/My Father Bleeds History* by Art Spiegelman, copyright © 1973, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1984, 1985, 1986 by Art Spiegelman 53

Introduction
Memory as Forgetting: The Problem of the Postmodern in Kundera's *The Book of
Laughter and Forgetting* and Spiegelman's *Maus*

In one of poststructuralism's most-quoted statements, Jacques Derrida declares in his *Of Grammatology* that "there is no outside-the-text" (158). While Derrida is principally interested in revealing the internal contradictions of foundational philosophy based upon binary divisions, his above declaration also suggests the impossibility of finding "truth," not merely in its transcendental philosophical sense, but also in the possibility of a material and historical referent. This assertion of the textuality of existence and the difficulty/impossibility of accessing a reality outside of representation and signification were not initially applied specifically to "history" as a concept by Derrida, but its implications for history in the postmodern world still resonate, particularly, as we shall see, in the case of traumatic events and historical incidents that serve as sites of communal and individual identification for oppressed peoples. Likewise, one of the most prominent philosophers of the postmodern, Jean-François Lyotard asserts that postmodernism (and modernism itself)¹ takes place in the realization that Enlightenment rationalism and scientific positivism are not tied to objective truth and reality, but rather are merely "language games," like narrative itself, that create "the effects of reality," that, in a postmodern age, become "the fantasies of realism" (Lyotard

74). In this context, “realistic” fiction, “objective” history, and positivist science become not only misled in their attempts to configure the world as an eminently understandable and coherent system, they also become ideologically charged deceptive practices that posit an immanent and essentialized world where none exists.²

This postmodern/poststructural emphasis on the “real” as inextricable from the constructed and the textual has also found its way into both historiography and historical fiction with potentially troubling social and political repercussions. This is particularly the case because of the ways in which the historical real is a site of political contestation. In the West, for instance, the ontological verifiability of the Holocaust is central to the identity formation of Jews and others. Relativist postmodern historiography that would theoretically insist that accounts of the Holocaust are closer to fiction than to “fact” (in their discursive and linguistic construction), undercut the communal insistence of Jews that the Holocaust be maintained as the “real” in communal history and memory as a bastion against future repetitions of the traumatic event.³ Similarly, a novel like Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* provides a sense of the “real” history of the Amritsar Massacre as opposed to the “official” history perpetuated by the British colonizers. It is this politically necessary real that would seem to be threatened by a radical

poststructuralism that denies the referentiality of any discourse, whether hegemonic or oppositional.

Linda Hutcheon has attempted to arrest this problem somewhat by redefining the postmodern as a discourse that is both historical in the traditional sense and deconstructive, both presenting the past as if such representation is easily accessible and transparent and exposing the linguistic, discursive, and ideological barriers to transparent representation. In Hutcheon's sense, postmodernism is simultaneously complicit with traditional historical accounts and their withering deconstructive critique, allowing the possibility that some degree of referentiality may be maintained. Despite Hutcheon's important intervention, however, many critics still read contemporary fiction within the context of the theoretical shift towards a poststructuralism that questions, even denies, the possibility of linguistic referentiality and sees the allusion to a material "reality" as at best specious theory and at worst collaboration in totalitarian dominance. This positioning of postmodern fiction within a broader poststructural movement is, at times, valid but, as I will argue throughout this study, it ignores a substantial and politically important branch of postmodern fiction that insists on access to some version of the "real," despite a continued skepticism towards universalizing discourses. I propose to label this important body of work "postmodernist historical fiction," throughout this study.⁴

Over the course of this work, I argue for a (re)evaluation of postmodernist historical fiction as a genre that insists on the presence of a past material reality beyond discourse *and* on the possibility of accessing that past. This, however, is not merely a hypothetical call for revising our views on a species of fiction, but also has ramifications for social and political praxis. I draw attention to this genre precisely because it insists on the political and ethical necessity of maintaining a sense of that historical real which resists the complete engulfment in text or discourse that poststructuralism suggests. It is my goal in this study to analyze this dimension of postmodernist historical fiction in order to reveal alternative ways to define and theorize the historical real and redeem this important vein of fiction from its common association with an ultimately apolitical relativism. By identifying how various examples of postmodernist historical fiction redefine both the real and historical referentiality itself without abandoning it, I believe we can escape the most troubling repercussions of deconstructive readings of history without sacrificing the theoretical insights of poststructuralism and postmodern theory. That is, postmodernist historical fiction has much to teach us about the nature of reality itself and particularly its representation.

Important to this discussion is the role of narrative form, both the reliance upon it in traditional historiography and the critique of it brought to bear by postmodern

historiographers like Hayden White. By considering how particular models of narrativity contribute to the sense of historical narrative as “false,” it becomes possible to reacquire the accurate, verifiable or “real” through models of anti-narrativity, representations of the past that reject or resist traditional narrative form, exhibited by the postmodernist historical fiction discussed in the chapters that follow. I will focus on only a few texts, Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* foremost among them, but will also refer to other texts that may fit under the umbrella I will define more expansively later in this introduction.

First, however, it is important to more clearly delineate the ethical and political problems generated by the deconstruction of traditional historical representation accomplished by (post)modernist historiographic discourse. To do so, I first examine the vanishing divisions between history and memory and the moral and ethical distinctions between them. I undertake this project in this introduction by looking at two works of postmodernist fiction⁵ that deal explicitly with the politics of memory and what Lyotard has labeled as the “withdrawal of the real” (79). Both Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* explore the contested relationships of memory, history, and collective memory and the problems raised by these categories in our postmodern world. The two novels propose and illustrate the traditionally central

importance of both individual and collective memory in advancing the political interests of oppressed peoples and particularly in protecting a communality and shared identification from the effacing powers of “official” or institutional history. However, both authors also point to how individual and collective memory are themselves inextricable from textuality and can both be modes of political oppression. In doing so, both authors foreground the difficulty for socially and politically oppressed peoples to participate in their own coherent and stable identity formation and representation through memory in an age identified as postmodern.

Through the investigation of two texts preoccupied both with memory and with a postmodern aesthetic, we can see how they reveal postmodernism as not only productive in its destabilization of power, but also problematic in its difficulties in offering concrete and stable counter discourses that do not themselves participate in oppression. Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* stage this problem of the postmodern⁶ in the theater of memory by foregrounding memory’s necessity in resisting power, while admitting its own tenuous ties to the real and its implication in the abuse of power. The process by which they dissolve the standard binary separation of history and memory complicates and foregrounds the problematic of historical representation by disallowing the primacy and originary authority of memory.

These texts do, however, also provide interesting and productive models for historical representation that are more evidently realized in the novels examined in the remaining chapters of this study. I leave the discussion of their inclusion in my proposed category of postmodernist historical fiction for my conclusion, as what is initially important for my argument is the examination of the problems they highlight.

Memory and Its Politics in Kundera and Spiegelman

Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* opens with two scenes that foreground the importance of individual and collective memory as important political tools to fight oppression. The first scene, set in 1948, depicts the frightening ability of the totalitarian Soviet-led regime in Prague to deface, erase and rewrite history to suit its own ideological ends. To illustrate this ability to alter history, Kundera relates the true story of Gottwald and Clementis, both Communist leaders. Gottwald gives a speech outdoors with Clementis by his side. Because it is cold and snowing, Clementis takes off his hat and places it on Gottwald's head. As Kundera describes, the moment became famous and was reproduced copiously. "On that balcony the history of Communist Bohemia began" (3). Four years later, like Trotsky in Russia, Clementis was charged with treason and was eventually hanged. "The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history

and, of course, from all photographs...Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald's head" (3-4). Kundera here underlines the possibility of, and inherent danger in, the effacing of historical "fact." Where Clementis once stood as a symbol of the brotherhood and good-feeling of Communism in its optimistic youth, now he is erased, no longer useful for a totalitarian regime.

The novel continues to point out how history is controlled and dictated by those in power, and the devastating effects that historical manipulation can have. Gustav Husak was the seventh president of Czechoslovakia, put into power by the Russians in 1969, and is named by the Kundera-narrator as the "President of Forgetting" (217). Husak earned the name by driving 145 Czech historians from research institutes and universities (218). In response to this, a displaced historian asserts, "You begin to liquidate a people...by taking away its memory. You destroy its books, its culture, its history...Then the people slowly begins to forget what it is and what it was. The world at large forgets it faster" (218). When the Kundera-narrator suggests however that "Nothing remains of Clementis," he is clearly being ironic and disingenuous. Clementis exists, at the very least, in Kundera's memory, a fact emphasized in the second scene of the novel.⁷

In the second scene, set in 1971 during the reign of Husak, Mirek, a resident of Prague, attempts to prevent the erasure of history through the vehicle of his own memory.

Mirek says, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” In doing so, he attempts “to justify what his friends call carelessness,” for what facilitates memory on one hand is the evidence for accusations of subversiveness on the other (4). Mirek’s friends are concerned that his collections of diary, correspondence, and minutes of meetings will be discovered and used as evidence against him.

Nevertheless, Mirek is intent on preserving and controlling his memories in the hopes of resisting power.

The notion of memory as an inherent bastion in the battle against political and social oppression is illustrated by, but is by no means limited to, Kundera’s *Book*. Similar discourses have been foregrounded in virtually all popular discussions of what is known as the Holocaust or the *shoah*,⁸ the extermination of millions of Jews by the Nazis during the second World War.⁹ Within this discourse, the very act of memory becomes a primary constituent of a Jewish identity and is meant to ensure that a similar act of oppression never occurs again. In this context, Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick has emphasized “the necessity of memory in a time when memory begins to melt into history and history is discarded” (qtd. in Brogan 163).¹⁰ Indeed the memory of the Holocaust has been seen by some to replace the other communal memories of Judaism. In observing a community seder in Texas, Phillip Lopate saw that “[...]the Shoah was at the

heart of their faith; it was what touched them most deeply about being Jewish. The religion itself— the prayers, the commentaries, the rituals, the centuries of accumulated wisdom and tradition— had shriveled to a sort of marginally necessary preamble for this negative miracle” (qtd. in Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* 34).¹¹ Likewise, as Peter Novick observes, “what American Jews *do* have in common is the knowledge that but for their parents’ or [...] grandparents’ or great-grandparents’ immigration, they would have shared the fate of European Jewry” (*Holocaust* 7). In this reading, the communal memory has become virtually the only thing that allows for the retention of a broad Jewish community.

It is the widespread allegiance to the memory of the Holocaust that has spawned so many narratives of survival of the death camps, including the formally unorthodox *Maus*, Art Spiegelman’s comic book depiction of his father’s (Vladek’s) experience in Auschwitz. The desire to remember and to construct a Jewish identity from that memory must have played a role in Spiegelman’s desire to record and represent Vladek’s story. It is also this belief in the centrality of memory that leads Artie (Spiegelman’s autobiographical representation in *Maus*) to reproach Vladek for destroying the diaries of Anja, Vladek’s wife:

VLADDEK. After Anja died I had to make an order with everything...These papers had too many memories. So I **burned** them...
[...]

ARTIE. Did you ever read any of them? ...Can you remember what she wrote?

VLADEK. No. I looked in. But I don't remember...Only I know that she said, "I wish my son, when he grows up, he will be interested by this."

ARTIE. GOD **DAMN** YOU! YOU— YOU MURDERER! HOW THE **HELL** COULD YOU DO SUCH A THING!!

VLADEK. Ach. (*Maus* 159)

Like Kundera's depiction of the propaganda machine that obliterates Clementis, and in doing so strikes a blow for "power" against man, Vladek has contributed (in Artie's eyes) to the forces of "forgetting" against the forces of memory. Artie's hope for a coherent remembered past from which to construct his own identity is denied by his father's destruction of the diary.

The political importance of memory, foregrounded in these passages, is not merely hypothetical. The prevalence of self-titled "revisionist historians," labeled instead "Holocaust deniers" by their adversaries, who deny the existence of the Holocaust, the existence of gas chambers, and the plan of the "final solution" itself, represent, for many, the attempt to erase and efface history in an attempt to perpetuate anti-Semitism. Kenneth Stern, of the American Jewish Committee, refers to the memory of the Holocaust as a protective force against prevalent anti-Semitism. "If the Holocaust is denied, relativized, recedes from memory with the passing of generations [...] a braking force against the two-thousand-year world tradition of anti-Semitism will be diminished" (24). Like

Kundera's Mirek, Stern invokes the power of memory as a bulwark against power and hatred. Personal memory and witnessing are, in this case, used as one type of historical evidence, but they are also used as a counterbalance to the manipulable documentary evidence of traditional written history. The number of people who take any stock in Holocaust denial is very small, and, indeed, they are described as "fruitcakes," "screwballs," and "nuts" in the space of three pages by the eminent historian Peter Novick in his *The Holocaust in American Life* (270-72). Nevertheless, the threat of the erasure of the past is taken seriously not because of the widespread political influence of these "screwballs," but because of the large importance attributed to the memory of the event itself, particularly in the Jewish community.

It is this centrality of memory that likewise leads French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet to title his book denouncing the denial of the Holocaust *Assassins of Memory*. Vidal-Naquet responds specifically to the accusations of one of the primary French deniers of the Holocaust's existence, Robert Faurisson, whose 1978 article, "The Problem of the Gas Chambers or the Rumor of Auschwitz" (Vidal-Naquet xi) was one of the initial attempts to deny the Holocaust's existence.¹² One interesting aspect of these pseudo-historical accounts is their refusal to allow personal memory as a means of evidence. David Cole, a Holocaust revisionist who appeared on a talk show in 1992 to

discuss the subject, denied the potential verifiability of eyewitness memory: “I hear eyewitnesses and then I hear other forensic and factual evidence. What am I supposed to do?” (qtd. in K. Stern 132). Jean-François Lyotard ironically identifies the deniers’ position on the impossibility of reliable memory-evidence: “His argument is: to identify a site as a gas chamber, I shall accept as a valid witness only a victim of such a gas chamber; now according to my adversary, such victims can only be dead; otherwise the gas chambers would not be what it is claimed to be; thus there are no gas chambers” (qtd. in Vidal-Naquet 144 n17). Faurisson’s attack on memory and its power leads Vidal-Naquet to his title, and gives Mirek and Artie ample reason, it seems, to fight relentlessly to retain their own personal memory against the potential effacement of history.¹³

From these examples, we might be inclined to see both Kundera and Spiegelman operating within, rather than against, a positivist, liberal humanist aesthetic and ideology. Mirek and Artie’s protests against the erasure, or manipulation, of historical fact seem to be about an epistemological problem rather than an ontological one. The implication by Mirek is that reality and truth do exist, and can be accessed relatively easily, but that totalitarian forces are working to efface them. Likewise, Artie’s protests seem to indicate that, given all of the documentary evidence, his mother’s identity can be recaptured. The binary of memory vs. forgetting positions the institutional (historical) forces on the side

of forgetting vs. the personal forces on the side of memory. Nevertheless, if postmodernism is about anything it is about the blurring of binaries and the dissolution of boundaries. While postmodernism may declare that the past is “evacuated of history and [this evacuation is] a signal of the artifice of any such account, any history” (Crapanzano 137), it does not declare memory as the immanent and essential replacement for history. Rather, like history, memory, autobiography, and memoir have been unmoored from their tenuous claims to “touching the world.”¹⁴

Through their mutual commitment to a postmodern aesthetic, Kundera and Spiegelman place their political defense of memory into question, both by problematizing memory’s own ties to referentiality and by exposing memory’s role in the administration of power. As both Kundera and Spiegelman clearly show, history, memory, and identity are, at least partially, matters of social construction, texts not truths. The question of whether or not Mirek’s or Vladek’s memories can found themselves politically outside of Derrida’s metaphorical text and in a material reality is a question of real political significance. In addition, (post)modernity’s consistent questioning of the capacity of memory to exist independently of forgetting or of the representation of memory that inevitably reconfigures it destabilizes the possibility of memory being deployed as a political and social bulwark against power.¹⁵

History, Memory, and Collective Memory

The differences between history, individual memory and collective memory are complex and at times difficult to distinguish. Nevertheless, with the essential importance of memory in resisting power specified above, it becomes necessary to construct some working definitions. For theorists of history like Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, and Maurice Halbwachs, the practice of history in the West, or, more accurately, the creation of history by Western historical discourse, is traditionally one which attempts to create a unity and an order out of the past. As de Certeau asserts, “[History] customarily began with limited evidence [...] and it took as its task the sponging of all diversity off of them, unifying everything into coherent comprehension” (*The Writing of History* 78). Robert Berkhofer, a historian, describes the idea of a comprehensive and unified history as “The Great Story,” the ultimate, perhaps unreachable, dream of the historical community. However, de Certeau goes on to explain that such a history is that which in turn gives the dominant society of the present a way to define themselves against that past, revealing how a dream of objective and complete comprehension is at least partially a means of domination and manipulation for the purposes of hegemony. “[I]ntelligibility is established through a relation to the other; it moves (or ‘progresses’) by changing what it

makes of its ‘other’— the Indian, *the past*, the people, the mad, the child, the Third World” (*Writing* 3; my emphasis). Likewise, Foucault’s philosophical affiliation with the “others” of the world makes him similarly critical and at times antagonistic to the traditional (or “classical”) “history” that de Certeau describes.

As Foucault asserts in a rare moment of direct confrontation: “The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 88). Foucault argues that such a “comprehensive view” erases the past rather than preserves it, and acts as a means of domination in the present, as this history serves the purposes of contemporary hegemony. Like de Certeau and Foucault, Maurice Halbwachs concurs that the “model” history has always been one of retrospective unification, the narrativizing and reconciling of diverse elements into a comprehensive and comprehensible “story” (see Halbwachs 101-105). As de Certeau and Foucault also suggest, Halbwachs argues that history always asserts its referentiality, insisting on the existence of certain events while actually shaping them into an intelligible story that separates the present from the past.

Certainly, we might see an extreme and twisted form of this version of history in the treatment of Clementis in Communist Bohemia. When Clementis and his hat are

viewed as part of Czech history (i.e., when this foundational moment is part of the Czech past that is meant to help define its present), the moment is allowed to survive in the narrative of the nation. However, when the present Czechoslovakia has no use for this past or when it does not fit into the unified story it presents to itself, Clementis is obliterated from official history. While this erasure is clear and obvious to anyone who remembers the history in which Clementis is included, theorists like de Certeau and Foucault assert that any classical or traditional unifying history that attempts to define the present by separating it from the “other” of the past, commits similar violence.¹⁶

Rather, Foucault suggests that “history becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being [...]. ‘Effective’ history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature, and it will not permit itself to be transported by a voiceless obstinacy toward a millennial ending” (“Nietzsche” 88). Here Foucault juxtaposes history as it has traditionally been practiced and suggests a new history (or genealogy) that dismantles, rather than unifies. This genealogy might, for instance, allow Clementis to remain in the picture even after he is no longer part of the ideology of the ruling class. That, indeed, an anthology like Peter Burke’s *The New History: Its Past and Its Future*, is dedicated to the institutional development of the “new history” that Foucault describes is a testament to the power of these ideas. In fact, the “new history”

has made such progress in the past thirty years that there has been significant backlash against it, spawning a “revival of narrative” and a hopeful return to the idea of the Great Story.¹⁷

Of course, rather than the “new” history that Foucault proposes, many theorists have suggested memory as the opposite to and reparative for history. Maurice Halbwachs, most well-known for his work on “collective memory,” sees memory as that which retains and holds continuities and consistencies within communities rather than the dramatic changes and ruptures between the present and the past that history chronicles.

History, I have said, is not interested in these intervals when nothing apparently happens, when life is content with repetition in a somewhat different but essentially unaltered form without rupture or upheaval. But the group, living first and foremost for its own sake, aims to perpetuate the feelings and images forming the substance of its thought. (85-6)

If this is the case, the critiques of history by de Certeau, Foucault and others seem to apply less to collective memory that does not seek to define the present by homogenizing the “other” of the past, but rather is content to protect and preserve shared traditions, feelings and images. As Halbwachs discusses, all individuals are part of several communities or “collectives” and each individual’s memories are constructed in relationship to those communities with no memory being purely individual or outside of a group context.¹⁸

This basic distinction between memory, collective memory, and history has caused some commentators to stress the distinctions between them and to bemoan the loss of memory with the advent of modernity.

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. (Nora 8)

This dichotomy is similar to the one initially suggested by both *Maus* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* as detailed above. Memory, in these texts, seems to be a tie to a community and an identity that is in danger of eradication by the forces of history. Artie and Mirek at first seem to seek to retain the “continuous present” of their memory in resistance to the defacing and erasing power of a retrospective renarrativization by a dominant power (as in the totalitarian Czech regime) or the obliteration from within (as in the case of Vladek’s destruction of the diaries). While Nora does not deny the inherent deformations, manipulations, and appropriations that memory is subject to, he notes that these are different from history because they are “unconscious” and thus not open to intentional hegemonic political abuse. As we shall see, however, this distinction that Nora insists upon is fragile at best.

The definition of “history” as provided by de Certeau and Foucault is, of course, not part of the traditional definition of history, but rather part of the poststructural attack on that definition. It is worthwhile to point out, however, that de Certeau and Foucault take part in the attempt to distance history from the “real” by revealing and stressing its inextricable ties to discourse. As de Certeau points out, in French (and in English) the word for past events *and* their retelling are the same (“history”) highlighting the impossibility of direct access to a historical real that is unmediated by discourse (*Writing* 21).¹⁹ Like Derrida, they argue, in this case, that history cannot be “outside the text,” and that rather than merely presenting the world, it “re-presents” it, substituting or supplementing discourse for the real. As Roland Barthes puts it “Historical discourse does not follow the real; rather, it only signifies it, endlessly reiterating that *it happened*, but without having this assertion be anything other than the obvious underside of all historical narrative” (Barthes, “Historical Discourse” 153-54; emphasis in original).

This move in historiography reflecting the postmodern “withdrawal of the real” has become fairly widespread and is reflected in much contemporary discourse. As Janet Abu-Lughod puts it, “accounts of social events are ‘constructions’ rather than descriptions isomorphic with some ‘objective reality’” (112). Or in Vincent Crapanzano’s words,

Today, in an age that has been declared postmodern [...] the ruin has been replaced by the quotation, the trace, really a pseudo-trace, a detritus, a referent, a carrying back to/from a past, that is so completely decontextualized, so open to recontextualization, that it [...] becomes at once an emblem of a past evacuated of history and a signal of the artifice of any such account, any history. (137)

In other words, to varying degrees, Crapanzano and Abu-Lughod acknowledge and assume that no historical account can be said to present what actually occurred. Rather, history, like fiction, is the representation of events in a narrative form, that uses narrative's techniques to create an artificial text. In many ways, as Hayden White has pointed out, the presentation of history in narrative form allows for the interpretation of history as a story, a plot with inherent meaning, where the conglomeration of historical events and detritus does not necessarily have meaning on its own. "In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience [...] historical stories [...] give to reality the odor of the *ideal*. This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as 'found' in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques" ("The Value of Narrativity" 20; emphasis in original). White here takes the less extreme postmodern position that reality does, in fact, exist, but that the shaping of and presentation of that reality through language, and particularly through narrative, fictionalizes it, shapes it into a story that cannot have unmediated access to reality. White

is one of the primary figures in what is often termed “postmodern historiography,” asserting in his *Metahistory* how history and historical narration is manipulated and shaped by various modes of “emplotment,” the shaping of found historical events into various predetermined narrative forms that govern future interpretation and the cognitive understanding of traditional historical narrative. I shall return to White, narrativism and its particular relevance to my own claims about postmodernist historical fiction later in this introduction.

For now, however, it is sufficient to note that the influence of White, Kellner, Ankersmit, et. al. is not precisely in the revelation of history as construction, but in the continuous sensitivity to this revelation and the argument that historical discourse should somehow reflect this sensitivity. If history, in a postmodern age, is less identifiably tied to the real, and more insistently a deformation of it, because of its tendency towards emplotment, contextualization, and retrospective narrativization, attempts like Mirek’s and Artie’s to oppose memory to history constitute an effort to arrest the “withdrawal of the real” by adverting to the continuous present that Pierre Nora and others find as constitutive of memory rather than history. This attempt, however, falters when faced with the many theorizations of memory itself as disconnected from the real.

Personal memory is, of course, most clearly represented by the genres of autobiography and memoir. As Paul John Eakin observes, “The presence of fiction in autobiography...tends to make us uneasy, for we instinctively feel that autobiography is...precisely not-fiction” (*Fictions* 9). Nevertheless, postmodern culture and poststructuralist theory have, of course, denied the possibility of a true representation of the self through language and the accurate recovery of a true self through memory. In addition, whereas some assume that autobiography is the objective representation of the self and presentation of past events, Paul de Man suggests:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined in all its aspects by the resources of his medium. (“Autobiography as De-Facement” 920; emphasis in original)

This typically poststructural reversal of signifier and signified suggests the creativity and performativity of the self in writing. Rather than representing an essential “self,” this view assumes that there is only the representation(s) and that memory and the self are created out of linguistic performance.

It is this view of memory that seems to subvert the political efficacy of both Mirek’s and Artie’s attempt to fight power through memory. Both Kundera and Spiegelman seem, at first, to be devoted to recapturing or defending a truth for

progressive political purposes, to prevent its effacement by totalitarian or anti-Semitic forces. In response to this conception, one might see the ideas of postmodernism (the “withdrawal of the real”) as a danger to their political aims, a relativism akin to that of the Holocaust deniers. Indeed, poststructuralism was frequently accused of providing the appropriate atmosphere for Holocaust denial to flourish on college campuses. If, as one strand of criticism offers, “postmodernism is disqualified from political involvement because of its narcissistic and ironic appropriation of existing images and stories,” (Hutcheon *Politics* 3) as well as its insistence on the incomprehensibility or impossibility of identifying a referent, it would seem to be irrelevant to the political and socially directed work that Kundera and Spiegelman are doing. Nevertheless, both authors make use of metafictional techniques in their attempts to achieve their political and aesthetic goals.

Certainly, from the perspective of a theorist like Fredric Jameson, postmodernism is a reflection of the decadence and narcissism of capitalist culture, not a means for active political discourse. However, for other theorists and practitioners of postmodernist fiction, the disappearance of the referent, the provisionality of truth and the denial of any totalizing master narratives provide liberatory opportunities. In this context, the master narratives of patriarchy, whiteness, centrality, heterosexuality and western discourse, are

seen as merely fictional histories that are, particularly in light of Foucauldian social theory, implements of power. The power to deconstruct these narratives and provide alternative narratives or counterhistories is essential to the politically radical branch of postmodernist thought. The ability to create the self, to re-present history, and to “play” in the newly unleashed signifiers is a political opportunity to topple, destroy, and provisionally replace the master narratives already in place. The withdrawal of the referent, however, equally leads the skeptic to inquire “Replace them with what?”

Kundera and Postmodern Memory

Where Mirek in “Lost Letters,” the first section of *The Book*, desperately hoards items of memory in an attempt to resist power, he also attempts to destroy other items that he does not wish to include or accept as part of his identity. Mirek sets out on an attempt to destroy love letters he once sent to Zdena, a former lover, by reclaiming the letters from her. He does not wish them to be part of his memory, his memory collection, or his identity. Rather he wishes to create an identity for himself out of his selected past.

His connection to his life was that of a sculptor to his statue or a novelist to his novel. It is an inviolable right of a novelist to rework his novel. If the opening does not please him, he can rewrite it or delete it. But Zdena’s existence denied Mirek that author’s prerogative. Zdena insisted on remaining on the opening pages of the novel and did not let herself be crossed out. (15)

Kundera's reputation as a master ironist is built on such moments as these; Mirek struggles against institutional power on one hand, while he attempts to construct his own identity through an act of power on the other. Kundera makes this analogy painfully clear:

He wanted to efface her from the photograph of his life not because he had not loved her but because he had. He had erased her, her and his love for her, he had scratched out her image until he had made it disappear as the party propaganda section had made Clementis disappear from the balcony where Gottwald had given his historic speech. Mirek rewrote history just like the Communist Party, like all political parties, like all peoples, like mankind. They shout that they want to shape a better future, but it's not true. The future is only an indifferent void no one cares about, but the past is filled with life, and its countenance is irritating, repellent, wounding, to the point that we want to destroy or repaint it. We want to be masters of the future only for the power to change the past. We fight for access to the labs where we can retouch photos and rewrite biographies and history. (30-31)

Kundera's analogizing of "real" life to the novel, and of Mirek to the novelist at first seems to be a convenient metaphor, condemning Mirek for confusing fiction and reality. However, as we shall see, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera resolutely blurs the line between fiction and reality, and leaves us wondering what other choice Mirek has in constructing his identity. While Mirek initially seems admirable in his efforts to preserve memory, the novel here indicates that memory, or at the very least, the inevitable narrativization of memory, is itself an instrument of power and potentially oppression.²⁰ It appears that the constitution of personal identity through memory-

construction is as potentially dangerous as its political mirror. In this case, Kundera foregrounds the similarities between institutional history and individual memory rather than their differences. Both are open to narrative construction, with Mirek's memory revision reflecting on the micro-level the totalitarian efforts to efface history that occur in the macrocosm of the political arena. Identity and history are both, then, like the novel, artistic and performative creations which do not represent truth. This passage additionally seems to suggest that the rewriting of one's own memory is not a liberating counternarrative to destabilize hegemonic official accounts, but is rather a universal impulse that is politically dangerous, an unavoidable abuse of power.²¹ Mirek's impulse to make a novel of his life is part of a tendency towards emplotment that is consistently highlighted and questioned by postmodern discourse. It is, in fact, the narrativity of history, that, for many, removes history from any possibility of referentiality. History, like fiction, partakes of the conventions of narrative, "selection, organization, diegesis, anecdote, temporal pacing, and emplotment" (Hutcheon *Poetics* 111). It is the re-presentation of events in a narrative form, using narrative techniques.

While history is accused of narrativization and unification by Foucault, de Certeau, and others, for some the attraction of memory is its resistance to such emplotment. For critics like Mae G. Henderson, the importance of memory is precisely in

its capacity to lie outside narrative. In a work like Henderson's study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, memories are configured as "residual images" or "rememories [Morrison's term]" (Henderson 66) that lie outside the cultural narrative and "haunt" the possibility of coherent meaning. This is especially so in cases of extreme trauma (as in the depiction of slavery in *Beloved* or in the case of the *shoah*) wherein events in the past have been psychoanalytically repressed and are therefore not possessed, owned, or assimilated by the subject. "'Rememory' [...] is something which possesses (or haunts) one, rather than something which one possesses" (Henderson 67) or reintegrates through Hegelian recollection. Possession of the cultural narrative, the administration of cultural history, is, for Henderson, the domain of the white man, while being possessed, or haunted by repressed memories is the initial role of the black woman. Again, as in Nora's conception of memory, memory is seen as a superior mode of accessing the past because it is not subject to intention, and as such, the conscious efforts of hegemonic or repressive interests.

The notion of the return of the repressed and the self-conscious use of ghosts and hauntings explored by Henderson has been one way of creating a binary between the emplotted history and the repressed memory. As Kathleen Brogan has discussed, the appropriation of the metaphor of haunting and ghosts has been central in depicting

repressed cultural and ethnic narratives. However, even in Henderson's understanding of haunting, Sethe cannot gain freedom merely by fragmenting and denying the "overemplotment" of the patriarchal inscription of her life, she must also create "an alternate plot structure" (74), a "counternarrative that reconstitutes her humanity" (79), by reincorporating the repressed event (her traumatic murder of her daughter, Beloved). In this way, emplotment is not merely the realm of the official historian, it is also essential in constructing resistant subjectivity.

It is the denial of the binary separation of the narrative, institutional, historical emplotment which represses and the individual, inassimilable memory that haunts and resists the initial narrative that Kundera seems careful to avoid here. As we have seen, Kundera reveals the tendency to emplot historical events even in the recesses of personal memory. If, as Kundera suggests, it is not only political parties, but all people who fight for a past they wish to "destroy or repaint," our understanding of reality can never be true, but can only be the result of a struggle for power and the access to emplotment. Clementis' hat may be present as a ghost or a haunting of the official narrative, but it can also be incorporated into that narrative through retrospective emplotment.²² In addition, Kundera dissolves the binary that separates history (external documents, emplotment, manipulable evidence) from memory (internal-mental, immanent, personal, witnessing,

resistance to emplotment) by proposing the presence of memory-objects (photographs, journals) as part of personal memory. In this way, the distinction between history and memory again becomes untenable.

While postmodern and poststructural theorization has been quick to deny the potential for full referentiality in language, Roland Barthes, a poststructuralist thinker, has been “remarkably gullible” (Rugg 11) in respect to the image, and particularly the photograph. Although Barthes acknowledges photography’s constructedness in its reliance on pose and perspective, he still believes in the “magic” of the photograph, in its status as an “emanation [...] of *past reality*” (*Camera Lucida* 88; emphasis in original). Barthes argues that photography’s “force is [...] superior to everything the human mind can or can have conceived to assure us of reality” (*Camera* 87). The seemingly transparent ability of the photograph to refer to reality seems to be a way to arrest the postmodern “withdrawal of the real” and to use memory as a bulwark against the narrative plot of history. “[P]hotographs [...] represent the physical [...] principle of reintegration in autobiography and photography: subject and object, self and other, body and voice” (Rugg 21).²³

Kundera, however, effectively denaturalizes the photograph as a representation of transparent reality and as a means of reintegrating self/other binaries. First, as we have

seen, photographs are seen to be, in the postmodern age, nearly as manipulable as language and text. Clementis can be erased from a photograph just as the Jews can be erased from the written history of Europe or African-Americans and women can be erased from the textual history of the United States. Vicki Goldberg has detailed how the computer and the Scitex machine have made the photograph as much a creative form as a representational one (cited in Shawcross 117-8). The easy accessibility of computer scanning and computerized photographic manipulation only contributes to this sense of the photograph as merely one more system of signification that does not have direct access to a referent. Likewise, rather than being merely a way to mimetically recover and reconstruct memories, photographs have been seen to construct and create them.

“Inevitably, the line between memory and photograph blurs, with photographic-era children uncertain as to whether their memories of childhood are memories of events they witnessed or photographs they have seen” (Rugg 23). When combined with the destabilization of the referentiality of the photograph, we can then see memory itself, or at least its Hegelian recollection, as a creative process, not merely within the subject, but also without, through the manipulation of memory-objects. Rather than providing for the integration of a unitary subject, we find, in *The Book*, subjectivity built on memory as a

prosthetic process, with external and manipulable items like photographs and journals being indispensable in the construction of the self.

While Gottwald and Hasak operate on a macro-level, manipulating memory-objects like the Gottwald/Clementis photograph to reinscribe the nation's history, Mirek does the same work on a personal level with the desire to destroy his letters to Zdena. With *The Book's* denial of the immanence of memory and the referentiality of both text and image, it is no longer possible to merely see memory as something that is repressed, resistant to the employment of official history. Rather, memory itself is a construction that takes part in the implementation of power relations. The binary separation of history and memory that we have seen Pierre Nora and others create is here substantially questioned, leaving the political efficacy of memory in resisting power similarly in question. Mirek's attempts to preserve the powers of memory against those of historical forgetting are seen to be largely textual constructions that themselves have difficulty in accessing the real.

Throughout Kundera's novel, the characters, including Kundera himself, search for and use memory, as Mirek does, as a means of identity construction. In another section of *The Book*, "Mama," Mama remembers and envisions herself as a young girl reciting a patriotic poem in 1918, celebrating the end of the Austrian Empire and the

establishment of the Czechoslovak republic, but forgetting the last stanza of the poem.

Although the audience did not realize that the poem was not over and responded with great applause, Mama, in her shame, rushed to the bathroom in despair.

As her son, Karel, points out, however, Mama's memory is faulty, a trick. Mama had already graduated by the time the great war concluded and her poem, in reality, was merely part of a Christmas pageant. Again, Kundera clearly establishes the story of the poem as a constituent of Mama's identity. Her romantic patriotism is embodied in this recollection; she clings to the memory despite her internal admission of its falsehood. In an effort to "write" her identity, when asked to recite the patriotic poem, she recites the Christmas poem while never acknowledging the discrepancy between her story and her recitation. Mama seems to prefer her own version of the event to the truth, or the official version of the truth, and builds her identity, her patriotism, on her version.

Karel, similarly, constructs his erotic identity on a childhood memory of witnessing his mother's friend Nora naked in a spa. This image, preserved in Karel's memory, is resurrected by Mama's assertion that his friend Eva looks like Nora. This assertion, combined with Karel's memory of the original event, makes Eva irresistibly attractive to Karel. For Karel, both Eva and Karel's wife, Marketa become objectified and emptied of their identity. Karel turns them into objects, rather than people. While making

love with them, “he felt like a great chess player who has conquered opponents simultaneously on two chessboards [...] he couldn’t help laughing and shouting: ‘I’m Bobby Fischer! I’m Bobby Fischer!’” (67). This hysterical identity-formation comes as a direct result of Karel’s access to his childhood memories. Rather than providing him with a barrier against power and ideology, it becomes an implement of gendered objectification. In *The Book*, memory is not merely the repressed resistance to historical “objective” narrative, it is also the personal construction of identity at the expense of others. Mama’s nationalism and Karel’s objectification of women rise directly from their emplotment, or narrative construction, of their memories.

Later, in “Lost Letters II,” Tamina attempts to create and define her own identity through the recovery of notebooks of love letters to and remembrances of her husband. Currently living in an unnamed town in the west of Europe and an escapee of the totalitarian regime in Prague, Tamina struggles to remember her husband, who died during the escape. Tamina, like Mirek, desperately wishes to recover the notebooks left in Prague, but to preserve them, rather than destroy them. For Tamina, the memory of her husband is the primary constituent of her identity. Rather than fighting to rewrite the novel of her life, she is fighting not to forget it, or so the narrator seems to suggest. As we have seen, however, the binary separation of these two acts seems impossible. Tamina

attempts to remember her husband by drawing pictures of him from an old passport photo and eventually imagines superimposing his features on every man she sees. "But all these efforts only showed that her husband's image was irrevocably slipping away" (117). As the possibility of retaining, recovering, and recuperating her memory and her notebooks recedes, so Tamina's identity disappears. She eventually retreats from the world altogether, to the oneiric island of children. Rather than creating an identity out of the narrative of her memory, Tamina's memory slips away, and her identity along with it. While the narrative construction of identity built on memory seems to be an act of domination, the inability to do so seems to lead then to a complete loss of identity, placing humanity in a difficult, if not untenable, position, in our relationship with the past and our memories of it.

In addition to the overall theme that nearly all people/characters in the novel write, construct or narrate their own lives into a provisional but constructed coherence or lose their identity altogether, Kundera, additionally, draws metafictional and explicit attention to their fictionally constructed status as well. Kundera declares, "It is a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina goes offstage, it is a novel for Tamina. She is its principal character and its principal audience, and all the other stories are variations on her own story and meet with her life as in a mirror" (227). This statement within the

novel, in typical postmodern fashion, attempts to break the barrier between fiction and reality. Tamina is both a clearly fictional construction and a “real” audience for the rest of the novel. She is both author and reader of her own life.

This metafictional dissolution and inversion of the distinction between fiction and reality is further complicated by Kundera’s resolute refusal of genre distinctions. As Kundera notes in an interview, *The Book* contains multiple and diffuse generic categories: anecdote, autobiographical narrative, critical essay on a feminist book, a fable on angels and devils, historical narrative, the dream narrative of Tamina’s death, musicological reflections, historicopolitical commentary, etc (*Art of the Novel* 76). Kundera’s blending, particularly, of history and autobiography with fiction and dream, works to show the impossibility of rigid genre distinctions, as well as the inherent fictionalizing of reality, and the inherent reality of fiction.

In doing so, Kundera does not exempt himself from his group of characters seeking and fictionally constructing identity through memory. In two autobiographical narratives, taking up parts of both sections entitled “Angels,” Kundera relates some of his own past, his erasure from history in Communist Prague,²⁴ his tenure as a horoscopist for a Communist publication and lead Communist official, and his relationship to his dying father whose memory was not erased, but which became incommunicable when he lost

the power of language. Kundera's father, victimized by aphasia, was reduced to the enunciation of two words, "That's strange." While Kundera does not explicitly show or comment, as he often does, on how these memories constitute his own identity, his selection of them for inclusion in a novel about memory's power, its seduction, and its role in constituting identity, clearly asks us to read him via these anecdotes. Kundera replaces a narrative in which he was "a man erased from history" (*The Book* 84), with his own account of his life. Like Mama, who chooses the memory of the poem, Karel who chooses the memory of Nora, Tamina who "recollects" the memory of Pavel, Mirek who wishes to erase Zdena from his palette of memories, and Artie Spiegelman who constructs himself through his father's memories, Kundera chooses to show us his marginalization and effacement as a person and as a writer, as well as his relationship with his father, and his affection for modern classical music. Kundera's identity, for the reader if not for him, is clearly constructed from these selected memories.

In addition, Kundera's comments that all the stories of the novel are variations or reflections of Tamina's story reduces and proclaims his own story (presumably placed in what would traditionally be called real history or autobiographical memory) to be merely a variation on hers. Her foregrounded fictionality does not subordinate her historicopolitical importance. Rather, she is the center around which the

autobiographical, historical, and political narratives revolve. In addition, Kundera's assertion that novelistic characters are, on one hand, "experimental [autobiographical] selves" for the author (*Art* 31), and, on the other hand, simultaneously nothing more than a conglomeration of words²⁵ which define their character, further complicates and subverts the reality/fiction boundary. If Tamina is simultaneously a fictional character, a reader, an experimental self for Kundera and a conglomeration of words, the separation of autobiography and fiction, reality and language, truth and narrative become impossible to maintain. Where Barbara Foley identifies the difference between truth narratives and fictional narratives in their cognitive reception by the reader, in which the reader decodes texts identified in these categories in different ways, Kundera works hard to subvert these cognitive differences, by mixing genres, by fictionalizing himself, and by giving the fictionally constructed and narrated characters privilege over historical narrative.²⁶

Where personal memory, at the opening of the *Book*, seems to be a way of safeguarding, verifying, or even resisting false history, by the end it seems clearly to be a performative construction, an act of repressive power (in the cases of Mirek, Mama, Karel, and Tamina), and, in many ways, has no concrete connection to the "reality" it purports to represent as a reparative to the effacement of history. In this way the self-reflexive, relativist use of metafictional technique and postmodernist assumptions makes it

impossible to maintain the binary that Mirek (and at times the Kundera-narrator) proposes at the outset. Memory, like history, is a construction, prone to fictionalization, that may provide a counternarrative to the official institutional history, but also may contribute to the loss of meaning and effacement of referentiality that Mirek seems bent on preventing in “Lost Letters.” If memory cannot, in and of itself, arrest the slippage of historical reference, the question remains whether it is possible, or advisable, to do so.

Spiegelman and Postmodern Memory

If the effectiveness of Mirek’s attempt to fight power through memory is undercut by the relativizing of memory itself through Kundera’s postmodern aesthetic, it is important to note the central role that personal and communal memory have played in the politically radical arm of postmodern thought. Because history is always written by the victors, the discourse of official history has become a central object of postmodern denaturalization. In this view, personal memory is often taken to be the reparative for institutional history. If institutional history is the perpetrator and perpetuator of a “master narrative” that marginalizes and confines large portions of a society, the localized and relative truth of personal and collective memory is often seen to be a means of reconstituting identity and fighting repressive power. Some cultural studies theorists

often choose to stop their analyses with the denaturalization of prevalent modes of essentializing thought through discursive analyses, while others champion the reclamation of lost voices and the reconstitution of counternarratives. While these projects are indispensable in any attempt to destabilize the discourses of bourgeois liberalism that still administer hegemonic power (patriarchy, whiteness, heteronormativity), it is also important to consider how postmodernism, if taken to its logical conclusion, can present a radical relativism that may lead to political paralysis, as in the destabilization of Mirek's attempts to fight hegemonic power. Where the localized, relativistic truths of personal memory may be championed as counterdiscursive in one context, their relativism and mutability may elsewhere be seen as oppressive.

Jonathan Boyarin has observed how the postmodern attempt to delegitimize "universal history" has, at times, led to the reification of memory and the understanding of history and memory as "fundamentally different modes of relating to the past, with the Jews as a favorite case of a 'people of memory' in opposition to history" (93). While personal memory is known to be prone to error, forgetfulness, and to be partially constituted of creative imagination, it nevertheless maintains for some, particularly in the case of a traumatic event like the Holocaust, some authority over the proliferation of textuality and electronic media so prevalent in the postmodern age.²⁷

It is nevertheless a given that in the postmodern age that there are no modes of representation and identity formation that have inherent authority, and that the valorization of memory, as Boyarin suggests, may be a reification that has political ramifications. This foregrounds the difficulty for socially and politically oppressed peoples to participate in their own coherent and stable identity formation and representation through memory in an age identified as postmodern. As we have seen, it is often the case that oppressed groups work to re-present, reincorporate, and renarrate traumatic events that would seem to lie outside the symbolic register (i.e. seem to be beyond signification or impossible to narrate).²⁸ The Holocaust, or the genocidal elimination of the Jews during the second World War, undoubtedly qualifies as a traumatic event that would seem to lie outside the possibility of narration and the plenitude of meaning.²⁹ Art Spiegelman has, indeed, referred to the *shoah* as “the central trauma of the Twentieth Century [sic]” (qtd. in LaCapra, *History and Memory* 140). While the traumatic event often leads to the repression of memories of the event,³⁰ as we have seen it also leads to the attempt to control, narrate, and give meaning to the event through recollection and narration.³¹ This may help to explain the collective Jewish impulse to “witness” through memory the events of the Holocaust. This impulse is illustrated by the Yale Fortunoff Collection of approximately 3,700 survival testimonies

and the Survivors of the Shoah Foundation which plans to record the testimonies of approximately 50,000 survivors (LaCapra, *History and Memory* 11).

As Dominick LaCapra discusses, these testimonies of personal memory serve as a source for official history without exhausting their potential for more imaginative identity construction. This also illustrates some anxiety about the possibility that the Holocaust may be forgotten once its primary witnesses disappear. As Michael Staub observes:

[...] they reflect a general anxiety over the impending death of all concentration camp survivors and their living memories. When they are gone, we will have mountains of written texts, videotapes, films, recordings and other evidence. But the actual voices will be lost forever. How, then, to approximate the authority of the oral in a world increasingly suspicious of and unconvinced by written evidence? (35)

Staub here expresses a postmodern skepticism as to the mimetic possibilities of textual signification, but posits the oral and the remembered as a possible reparative to the official history of textuality. The difficulty of maintaining this binary is clear in the thousands of memories committed to paper, audiotapes, and videotapes in an attempt to approximate a supposed immanence and referentiality that the oral represents for some.³²

The adoption of a prosthetic memory, indicates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of “touching the world,” in representing the experience of the *shoah*. As the presence of personal memories become past textual history, the line between these two hypothetically opposed terms dissolves. While collective memory and its traditions theoretically survive

in the continuous present as long as the community survives, the almost obsessive collection of survival testimonies and the commitment of them to textual representations indicates a communal anxiety about the possibility of maintaining such a collective identity without the tools of history to “fix” and eternalize the past.

As Sander Gilman has shown, in the nineteenth century Jewish identity had been constructed from without by scientific discourses that constructed “Jew” as a race rather than as a religion. Eastern Jews were seen as “Oriental,” while Western Jews were often classified as “black,” and both groups were seen as, irredeemably, a mongrel race, a hybrid and contaminating mixture. Likewise, Jews were identified by their flat feet, their big noses, their proclivity for sexually transmitted diseases, and above all, for men, by their circumcised penises. As Gilman explores, the traumatized male member marked the Jew as not only racialized, but also feminized and pathologized. In this sense, the figure of the Jew becomes an ideal site for the postmodern discursive denaturalization of the social text of nineteenth and early twentieth century discourse that posed scientific positivism as a master narrative. Gilman himself repeatedly has done the work of exposing the racializing, feminizing, and pathologizing discourses precisely as social text, rather than as scientific truth, showing how the white, European, Christian, patriarchal dominant was able to construct an identity for Jews accepted by a large

percentage of Europeans in the years preceding World War II and, to a lesser extent, after.

In the wake of this denaturalization of imposed Jewish identity, collective memory has become increasingly important in reconstructing a Jewish community. If it has become common to de-essentialize notions of “formal-race,” in order to subvert oppression, a reliance on “historical race” has become necessary.³³ While biological pseudoscientific notions of racial difference (couched in positivist or scientific discourse) have been exposed as social construction, the material effects of those discourses have helped *create* a community with common experiences, bound together not only by shared experiences and traditions, but also by shared persecution. While ascription from without is still a troubling fact of racist, imperialist and sexist cultures, the postmodern age has also increasingly allowed for people to, in Toni Morrison’s words, “choose their identities. Now people choose to be Black. They used to be *born* Black. That’s not true anymore” (qtd. in Brogan 12; emphasis in original).³⁴ Replacing the pseudo-scientific conflation of racial and religious identifications, Jews and other oppressed groups have often turned to shared collective memory to reinscribe their own subjectivity.

Again, however, we must observe that such reinscription is neither ideologically neutral nor unmediated in its access to and construction of a shared past. As Marc Ellis

has observed, the reincorporation of a traumatic memory to build a primary identity is not necessarily liberatory nor advisable in constructing a personal or religious identity.

Rather, Ellis observes how it was only in the wake of Israel's 1967 war that "Jews articulated for the first time both the extent of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust and the significance of Jewish empowerment in Israel" (qtd. in Rothberg 680). This in turn, claims Ellis, began to give Jewish consciousness a primary identity of "innocence and redemption," building Jewish identity out of the role of "innocent victims" and building the identity of Israel to be one of "messianic redemption" (Rothberg 680).³⁵ The deployment of the Holocaust as a political and discursive means of validating Israeli aggression is also noted by Israeli philosopher Yehuda Elkana, a survivor of the death camps. In his "A Plea for Forgetting," Elkana argues that the Holocaust lesson that "the whole world is against us" and that "we are the eternal victim" was "the tragic and paradoxical victory of Hitler" (qtd. in Novick, *Holocaust* 164). Indeed, Elkana asserts that "this lesson [...] had contributed to Israeli brutalities in the West Bank and to the unwillingness to make peace with the Palestinians" (Novick, *Holocaust* 164). Ultimately, Elkana argues that the Jewish injunction to remember is misleading and, indeed, damaging, "It may be that it is important for the world at large to remember [...]. For our part, we must *forget!*" (qtd. in Novick, *Holocaust* 164; emphasis in original). This

argument is not based on a wish for the bliss of ignorance, but rather on the observation of the deformative and ideological inevitabilities involved in reconstructing memory.

As in the case of Kundera's novel, both Elkana and Ellis see many Jewish people choosing the traumatic memory to define themselves, activating a "legitimizing apparatus for Jewish chauvinism and for the Jewish state, since, within its terms, we cannot acknowledge Jews themselves victimizers, either as individuals or as a collective" (Rothberg 680-1). Like Kundera, Ellis and Elkana see the construction of identity through memory (or its recollection) as a potential abuse of power to oppress others. Memory is not merely used to create a collective consciousness or to fight off the erasure of history by Holocaust revisionists, but also to legitimate Zionist aggression, particularly, in the arena of Israeli/Palestine relations (see also Rothberg 680-83). Memory is not an innocent remembering, nor is it merely in its historical inaccuracy that it can be liberatory or dangerous, it is also a means of constructing identity that can constitute an abuse of power. The current and continuing struggles in the Middle East underscore the very real ramifications of emphasizing and reconstructing collective memory.

It is in this context that Art Spiegelman embarks on his own representation of Vladek's survival testimony. Like Kundera, he partakes of a postmodern aesthetic that places the truth value of memory, history, and identity into question, never claiming for

himself the historical accuracy of truth-telling that might allow for the co-option of his work into essentialist constructions of history or Jewish identity. At the same time, he is committed to representing history in all of its specificity and factuality in an effort, among other things, to prevent revisionist effacement.

Like Kundera, Spiegelman uses multiple generic conventions in order to separate his work from a univocal survivor's testimony or a historical document. Spiegelman's book is biography, autobiography, comic book, animal fable, oral history, and graphic novel all at once. As commentators on *Maus* never fail to observe, Spiegelman does not represent his father or anyone else in the world of *Maus* as people, but rather as anthropomorphic animals. Although the books are labeled as "Holocaust/Autobiography," the supposedly real representations of people are drawn in comic-book form and as animals. The Jews are mice, the Nazis are cats, Americans are friendly dogs, French are frogs, Poles are pigs, and Gypsies are, of course, moths. Spiegelman, in this way, both literalizes and denaturalizes the stereotypical Nazi assessment of Jews as vermin and disease carriers in order to portray the anthropomorphic mice as real people.³⁶ It is also true that Spiegelman does not attempt to humanize many other groups, particularly the Nazis, who remain predatory throughout. In displaying all the groups as comic-book animals, however, Spiegelman is sure to distance his Holocaust narrative

from any claim to actual truth. Indeed, when *Maus* was listed on the “Fiction” side of the *New York Times* bestseller list, Spiegelman complained, ironically admitting the generic problematic that *Maus* creates:

If your list were divided into literature and nonliterature, I could gracefully accept the compliment as intended, but to the extent that “fiction” indicates that the work isn’t factual, I feel a bit queasy [...]

The borderland between fiction and nonfiction has been fertile territory for some of the most potent contemporary writing [...]. I shudder to think how David Duke— if he could read— would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father’s memories of life in Hitler’s Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction.

I know that by delineating people with animal heads I’ve raised problems of taxonomy for you. Could you consider adding a special “nonfiction/mice” category to your list? (qtd. in LaCapra, *History and Memory* 145)³⁷

The fact that the *Times* agreed with Spiegelman and moved his book from the fiction to the nonfiction list (see Doherty 69) hardly changes the dynamics at play here. In his letter, Spiegelman displays both an allegiance to history as factual, as a political necessity to refute the David Dukes of the world, and an acknowledgment that his book is not and cannot be completely non-fiction. He has created a hybrid category³⁸ that both relies on identity, history and memory and also visually exposes them as essentialist notions. Spiegelman’s allegiance to historical accuracy is evident in his careful reconstruction of people, places and events. In an interview, he acknowledges this attempt, “Now, my father’s not necessarily a reliable witness and I never presumed that he was. So, as far as I could corroborate anything he said, I did— which meant, on

occasion, talking to friends and to relatives and also doing as much reading as I could” (Brown 93). Artie even asks another survivor, Pavel, for clarification on details after his father’s death (*Maus II* 47), and includes representations of sketches by Vladek to clarify his oral testimony (*Maus* 110; also see *Maus II* 60, 70). Nevertheless, accompanying Spiegelman’s efforts at historical reconstruction are self-reflexive acknowledgments of the futility of this attempt. In another interview, he observes, “essentially, the number of layers between an event and somebody trying to apprehend that event through time and intermediaries is like working with flickering shadows. It’s all you can hope for” (Brown 98). In this, his view reflects those of the numerous Holocaust commentators we have seen above.

Indeed, Spiegelman’s text both embodies and refutes positivist scientific definitions of the Jew. *Maus* combines two of the most threatening and overdetermined aspects of the Jewish stereotype, the *Mauscheln* and the *Mischling*. Although Spiegelman clearly uses the German word for mice in his title, he also clearly draws upon *Mauscheln*, “the speaking of German with a Yiddish accent, intonation, or vocabulary...” (Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* 88). Clearly Vladek’s speech represents a version of *Mauscheln*, taken by anti-Semites as a sign of difference and duplicity, a hidden language (Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* 88; also see 10-37), but turned here into a way of provisionally recovering a

positive Jewish identity.³⁹ In addition, the once derogatory concept of *Mischling*, the discursive construction of Jews as a hybrid, impure, and mongrel race (Gilman, *Kafka: The Jewish Patient* 14-15), is positively transformed into Spiegelman's hybrid, literary/popular, image/text, fiction/history creation. In this way Spiegelman is able to partake in the postmodern denaturalization of master narratives, revealing how the body and the voice are discursively constructed in service of Nazism and broader anti-Semitism.

Further, *Maus* is not merely the story of Vladek's survival, and includes, particularly in *Maus II*, a third narrative of how Artie survives the telling. Indeed, Artie's attempts to keep Vladek focused on his story and to check his facts transforms the story from Vladek's "autobiography" into a collaborative project that adds representational problems (see Iadonisi). In elaborating these narrative frames, Spiegelman provides himself with additional opportunities to question the truth-value of memory and the results of constructing identity out of memory, even as he relates Vladek's story in comic form. At the opening of *Maus II*. Artie discusses how he will draw his wife. Françoise, with her, emphasizing the fictionality of his production.

ARTIE: What kind of animal should I make you?

FRANÇOISE: Huh? A mouse of course!

ARTIE: But you're French!

FRANÇOISE: Well...How about a Bunny Rabbit?

ARTIE: Nah. Too sweet and gentle.

FRANÇOISE: Hmmph.

ARTIE: I mean the French in general. Let's not forget about the centuries of anti-Semitism. I mean, how about the Dreyfus affair? The Nazi collaborators! The—

FRANÇOISE: Okay! But if you're a mouse, I ought to be a mouse too. I converted didn't I? (*Maus II* 11; see figure 1)

This passage foregrounds the difficulty or impossibility of assigning essentialist racial features to an individual, but it also shows Spiegelman's power. The historiography



Figure 1: From *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale/And Here My Troubles Began* by Art Spiegelman, copyright © 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991 by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

of *Maus* is always presented through Spiegelman's representations, representations which carry the tremendous power of allegorical iconography in addition to his own choice (from his father's choices) of what facts to represent and how to represent them. In the scene quoted above, Artie experiments with several sketches of Françoise,

literarily illustrating the power of imagistic representation. Both the character Artie and the author, Art Spiegelman, control the ways in which we perceive Françoise and the other

historical figures in *Maus*, much as anti-Semitic discourse controlled perceptions of Jews in the years preceding the Shoah. Spiegelman's self-reflexive portrayal of this

problematic helps provisionalize the memories he shows us. Particularly in *Maus II*, Artie begins to show an intense realization of the problems inherent in historical production:

ARTIE: Sigh. I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. And trying to do it as a comic strip! I guess I bit off more than I can chew. Maybe I ought to forget the whole thing. There's so much I'll never understand or visualize. I mean reality is too complex for comics...So much has to be left out or distorted.

FRANÇOISE: Just keep it honest honey.

ARTIE: See what I mean...In real life you'd never have let me talk this long without interrupting. (*Maus II* 16)

The metafictional self-reflexiveness of this passage is extraordinary. Like Kundera, Spiegelman here foregrounds the literary production of his supposedly representational/ mimetic work. Not only does Artie admit the inherent pitfalls in narrativizing history, he also subverts the binary of reality/fiction by having the fictional Artie comment on his own status as literary production. "In real life," he says, highlighting the fact that, of course, this representation of life is not life, while at the same time narrating the impossibility of representing life accurately. These metafictional references to the constructedness of the text of *Maus* increase in *Maus II*, with the writing continually drawing attention to itself as writing. Another example occurs when Artie goes to see his "shrink" Pavel. "His place is overrun with stray dogs and cats [...]. Can I mention this or does it completely louse up my metaphor" (43). Here, Spiegelman acknowledges the possibility of the metaphor getting beyond his control and freely

admits its limits. His translation of memory results in unavoidable inaccuracy and highlights the metaphor-laden fictionality of his representations.



Figure 2: From *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale/My Father Bleeds History* by Art Spiegelman, copyright © 1973, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1984, 1985, 1986 by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

Even the first volume of *Maus* contains self-reflexive attempts to illustrate the constructed nature of Spiegelman's historical project, most apparently in the comic within a comic of the autobiographical "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," a short "obscure underground comic book" (99) that he had written in 1972.

The comic presents the suicide of Spiegelman's mother, along with his own self-involved interpretation of events in which he blames his mother for his own emotional death. This

comic-book depiction of stylized human figures illustrates the subjective constructedness of Spiegelman's younger work, while reflecting on the depiction of the animals in *Maus*.

The sudden depiction of stylized human figures in a narrative about anthropomorphic mice highlights the fact that there is a human writing/drawing the mouse Artie, who, in turn, wrote the "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," which, at the same time, was written by the

real human Spiegelman. This blurring of the distinction between reality and fiction helps to prevent the reader from ignoring the historiographic construction of *Maus*, despite its seemingly univocal presentation of Vladek's experiences.

In addition, both "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" and *Maus II* contain realistic photographs of the characters involved, emphasizing once more the fictional constructedness of the rest of the text (*Maus* 100; see figure 2).⁴⁰ Although here the photograph seems to be meant to provide a "reality effect," the stylized, sketched hand that holds the photograph in the comic, helps to contribute to the sense that it is more of a "fantasy of realism" than a clear touching of the world. If a constructed, drawn human hand is holding the picture, which is in turn part of a comic held by an anthropomorphic mouse in a comic which is held by a presumably human reader, the layers of reality and construction become truly vertiginous. The photograph itself does not provide us with any guarantee of referentiality, especially given the family's apparent happiness in the photo. This happiness is belied by the mother's suicide and the son's recent release from a mental hospital in the *mise en scene*. The posed and constructed nature of the photograph is itself revealed as a fiction. The photograph of Vladek which appears later in the book is similarly posed, showing him in a concentration-camp uniform despite the fact that it was taken in a souvenir shop after the war had concluded (*Maus II* 134; see

also Hirsch 23-25). Elsewhere in the book, photographs themselves are shown as drawn mouse figures, as the real is replaced by the constructed (*Maus II* 115). In this way, as Marianne Hirsch observes, “Spiegelman lays bare the levels of mediation that underlie *all* visual representational forms,” (11) rather than privileging one over another.

In this way, history and memory are questioned, even as they are presented.

Where memory might initially be seen as a stable and clear way to fight social and political oppression, it soon becomes destabilized and questionable in Spiegelman’s postmodern self-reflexivity. As we have seen above, essentialist racial identity is questioned in the body of the text in similar ways, but is further destabilized by the narrative itself. Throughout Vladek’s narrative, there are times when the Jews put on pig masks in order to disguise themselves as Poles and escape Nazi persecution. As Vladek reminds us, this is easier for those without stereotypical distinguishing racial markers, as some mice are depicted with tails, while others are not.⁴¹ This use of animal masks makes an initial foray into the de-essentializing of racial identity. Nevertheless, it is initially consistent with the metaphors of the narrative and does not exceed their boundaries.

Later, in *Maus II*, Spiegelman begins to more self-reflexively exhibit postmodern notions of the dynamic performativity and constructedness of identity. Chapter Two (“Auschwitz (Time Flies)”) finds Artie depicted as a man with a mouse mask. Television

interviewers and his therapist are depicted, similarly, as men with animal masks in this framing section, where Artie is interviewed about the first volume of *Maus* for television and pays a visit to his therapist. Humans then seem to choose their identity and their race, in the way we have seen Toni Morrison suggest, by wearing masks, while simultaneously asking Artie what masks he assigns them. One reporter in a mouse mask asks, “If your book was about Israeli Jews what kind of animal would you draw?” (*Maus II* 42). It is hard here to agree with Marianne Hirsch’s suggestion that Spiegelman “come[s] close to duplicating the Nazi’s racist refusal of the possibility of assimilation or cultural integration when he represents different nationalities as different animal species” (13). Particularly in *Maus II*, it is clear that these different “species” or “races” are masks human’s wear, choices they make, not inviolable elements of nature. In Nazi Germany’s case, of course, the choices were made from without, not from within, but this can hardly be considered natural or essential from the perspective Spiegelman offers in *Maus*.

Indeed, this attention to the performative construction of identity takes place in what is undoubtedly the book’s most self-aware moment. Spiegelman depicts Artie worrying about the mass-market co-option of his Holocaust narrative. Artie sits at his drawing table, in front of television interviewers, discussing his own commercial success while sitting atop a pile of mouse corpses. Clearly, Artie is concerned about what Fredric

Jameson might call the commodification of his art. The sense that he may be faking authenticity without realizing it, or that there can be no separation of the money-making commodity and its artistic and social significance, finds Spiegelman pointing resolutely to the constructedness of his artistic creation and the constructedness of his own identity, wearing the mouse mask for commercial gain. That this commercial gain is built on the deaths of millions of dead mice, or Jews, is horrifically and vividly depicted. The simultaneously humorous but threatening depiction of the American advertiser offering a licensing deal for Artie vests (“Maus. You’ve read the book now buy the vest!” (42)) depicts the postmodern tendency for binaries to become nonexistent. Not only are signifier/signified and reality/fiction barriers destroyed, but the differences between commercial product and high art are self-reflexively dissolved as well. Similarly, Spiegelman is more careful to depict the technological construction of his text in *Maus II*, illustrating not only Vladek telling his story into Artie’s tape recorder, but also Artie listening to the tapes (47) and sitting at his drawing table in an attempt to translate oral narrative and recording into a comic-book narrative.

Finally, as Arlene Wilner points out, even Vladek’s oral narrative is specifically configured not only as history, but also as “story,” subject to the perils of emplotment that, critics have suggested, separate history from a purely referential role. Here we can

see that Staub's invocation to "approximate the authority of the oral" is, at least somewhat, misguided. The very transformation of life into narrative, even without the comic-book format and second-hand testimony of Artie, is a construction that asserts meaning where none, necessarily, exists. When Vladek closes his narration by saying, "We [Vladek and Anja] were both very happy, and lived happy, happy, ever after," (*Maus II* 136), the reader can only read this as a fairy tale construction of actual events, a violent unification of diverse elements. From reading Artie's frames, specifically "The Prisoner on the Hell Planet," the reader knows that Anja commits suicide and that Vladek's later life is far from a fairy tale. His inclination to close his narrative at the end of his Holocaust experiences illustrates the danger of narrativizing reality, despite the seeming unavoidability of doing so. Like Kundera's Mirek, Vladek is seen to want to control his memory through narrative recollection. Just as Mirek attempts to erase Zdena's life, Vladek attempts to erase the trials of Anja, and, simultaneously, completely erases his second wife, Mala, from his life's narrative. It is only through Artie, whose narration is equally questionable, that we learn of Mala at all.

By refusing to allow Vladek a univocal presentation of events, Spiegelman is careful not to allow traumatic memory to define Vladek, and the Jewish people in general, as victims who remain innocent. Vladek, through Artie's eyes, is seen to be a

racist and a miser, someone neither Artie nor Françoise can stand. What is more, the text refuses to allow the Holocaust as an excuse for domineering and occasionally hate-filled behavior.

ARTIE: I used to think the war made him that way.

MALA: Fah! I went through the camps...All our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him!

ARTIE: Mm... It's something that worries me about the book I'm doing about him...In some ways he's just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew. (*Maus* 131-2)

Here Spiegelman shows a refusal to allow Vladek only the role of victim, while at the same time indicating anxiety over the possible narratives available to him. Vladek may be a miser, but Spiegelman does not want to participate in anti-Semitic discourses that would define Vladek as a caricature of the miserly Jew. Instead, all he can do is draw attention to the problem.⁴²

Vladek's racism is especially telling in showing the dangers of constructing narratives out of memory. When Vladek balks at the prospect of picking up a black hitchhiker and inscribes him with familiar stereotypes, it is clear that Vladek's memory does not provide him with a sense of communality for those similarly oppressed, but rather gives him a sense of entitlement.

FRANÇOISE: That's *outrageous*! How can you, of all people, be such a racist! You talk about blacks the way Nazis talked about the Jews!

VLADEK: Ach! I thought really you are more smart than this, Françoise...It's not even to compare, the Shvartzers and the Jews!

Here, the denaturalization of essentialized racial identities for Jews is not extended to the “shvartzers,” as Vladek calls them. Instead, the reconstruction of Jewish identity, built partially on the *shoah*, reconstructs the Jew as white, as the black man’s “other.” While Jews themselves were often configured as black, equivalent to those of African descent, in nineteenth century racist discourse,⁴³ this discursive transformation of Jews from black to white, allows for the transformation of the Arab in Palestine into an “other”, rather than a sibling in racial oppression.⁴⁴ As Edward Said has pointed out in multiple contexts, Zionism may be a positive site of communal identity formation for the Jew, but it remains a site of racist inscription for the Arab inhabitants of Israel. The Arabs are seen as “outlandish, strange, hostile” (“Zionism” 216), much as Vladek sees the black hitchhiker. Although Spiegelman may not be referencing this analogy directly in this scene, as Michael Rothberg suggests (682), he is undoubtedly highlighting the discursive production of racial identity and how identity can be constructed at the expense of others. That memory is seen throughout *Maus* as a primary identifier for Jews highlights its role in constructing new narratives that threaten to inscribe “others.” In this sense Jonathan Boyarin’s advice to avoid the construction of identity based on place, specifically Zionist Israel, and replace it with identification based on memory is subtly delegitimized. It is, at

least partially, the reconstruction of a narrative based on memory, that allows the (over)identification with the state of Israel.

As Kundera comments on the irony of Mirek exerting his memory's power onto Zdena, Spiegelman, through his metafictional and postmodernist techniques, continually draws attention to the constructedness of Vladek's narrative and its potential use as an instrument of power. Vladek's erasure of Anja's suffering in the post-Holocaust years and his one-sided portrayal of Anja counterbalance the narrative of the resourceful survivor of the primary narrative. At the same time, Spiegelman refuses to represent himself in a completely positive light, showing Artie's lack of appreciation for his marriage and his complicity with the commercialization of the *shoah*. In addition to these problematics, as we have observed, Spiegelman continually foregrounds his story as "text," and not as "truth," showing, like Kundera, that memory, history and identity are all largely constructions that are always part of ideological/political discourse and oppression, whether this is conscious or not.

Kundera, Spiegelman, and the Problem of Ideology

Thus far, I have focused on the degree to which the effort to oppose history and memory in an effort to valorize the referentiality of the latter is exposed as untenable within these

two texts, and within a rigorous account of postmodern discourse. In this, my approach might be labeled as a kind of vulgar deconstruction that undercuts a commonly held binary, revealing how both history and memory are subject to construction and narrativization, leaving us further away from a representation of the “real” than when we began. In this process, I have also endeavored to emphasize the problems inherent in this approach, the political and ethical stakes involved in the abandonment or deconstruction of any kind of historical referentiality. That is, while the denaturalization of particular accounts of the historical past can be liberating and radical reassessments that give additional freedom to the oppressed, the simultaneous denaturalization of alternative histories and memories leaves such freedoms on shaky ontological ground. An uneasiness with the results of this approach is illustrated both in these texts and within the broader debate on these issues. Over the course of the remainder of this study, I will look more closely at how several examples of postmodernist historical fiction endeavor to overcome this problem and retain a hold on the referent of the historical past. In doing so, I suggest an expansion of approaches to the past, abandoning both the naively material and the extremity of some types of postmodern relativism. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of the issue and to not dismiss a postmodernist or poststructural approach as an irrelevant or insular theoretical

relativism. Rather, this approach teaches us both not to accept notions of transparent referentiality and also not to behave as if historical representation is simple and transparent, even when we know it is not. While the former is fairly uncommon in contemporary historiography, the latter continues to be the dominant attitude towards historical representation, as discussed above. Kundera and Spiegelman teach us to take the problems of historical representation seriously, while warning against simplistic theoretical ways out, like the naive adoption of personal and collective memory as the reparative to history. What they less effectively offer, however, is a functional and theoretically tenable alternative approach to representations of the past. While sitting on his psychiatrist's couch in *Maus II*, Artie Spiegelman quotes Samuel Beckett, "Samuel Beckett once said: 'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.'" He follows this by stating, "On the other hand, he *said* it" (*Maus II* 45). Here Spiegelman offers the double-bind that the possibility of political action encounters in the postmodern world, particularly through memory-work and historical representation. Textual proliferation both foregrounds relativistic historiography and indicates the futility of attempting social change. "...look at how many books have already been written about the Holocaust. What's the point? People haven't changed...Maybe they need a newer, bigger Holocaust," says Artie (*Maus II* 45). Mirek's notion that personal memory can be a social

and political bulwark against political oppression is denied by Artie's statements, and yet, like Beckett, he makes them.

In addition, as both Kundera and Spiegelman show in their hybridized texts of fact and fiction, of memory and creation, memory cannot be seen as a security blanket against the master narrative of history, because memory itself dynamically creates history, and is an implement of power or ideology. While Mirek, Mama, Karel and Tamina cling to pasts that are at least partially of their own creation, Kundera, in a later essay, acknowledges the impossibility of maintaining the memory/forgetting binary, "We do not know [reality] as it is in the present, in the moment when it's happening, when it *is*. The present moment is unlike the memory of it. Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting" (*Testaments Betrayed* 128). Here Kundera denies the notion of the continuous present suggested by Nora as a feature of memory itself. Rather, Kundera suggests that memory, like history, is irrevocably and irremediably separate from the presence that is associated with the "present" or the "real."

As Kundera points out, and as the characters of *The Book* and *Maus* illustrate, memory is not inviolable, it is a series of selections and erasures that defines it as much by what it is not as by what it is. These selections and erasures earmark memory, like

identity and history, as a construction. Although it is true that historical events have political, social, and bodily repercussions, it is also true that the reconstruction of those events also have sociopolitical consequence. There is no essential memory that lies outside the constructedness of discourse, at least according to the postmodern aesthetic that the work of both Kundera and Spiegelman suggest. In “The Border,” the final section of *The Book*, Kundera comments on the problem that this simultaneously postmodern and political viewpoint presents. “It takes so little, so infinitely little, for someone to find himself on the other side of the border, where everything— love, convictions, faith, history— no longer has meaning” (281).

On one side of the border, as Kundera configures it, is the radically postmodern,⁴⁵ a world where there can be no meaning, referent, or political commitment whatsoever. The other side, however, is equally problematic. The assigning of meaning, love, faith, history, and even personal memory, inevitably leads to a perpetuation of ideology, or in Kunderan terms, an idyll. As many Kundera critics have noted, the figure of the closed circle, the “circle dance,” or the “idyll” shown throughout *The Book*, indicates Kundera’s distaste for univocal meaning, the single belief of the circle dance. For Kundera, those who put their faith in communism were victims of ideological essentialism, as are the girls in “The Angels” who assign a single, ironically semiotic and deconstructive,

meaning to Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. They dance in a solipsistic circle, trusting in the security of their ideology and meaning. Kundera acknowledges the appeal of essentialist ideological discourse ("I too once danced in a ring" (*The Book* 91)), but refuses it, just as he refuses a postmodern loss of meaning that is not politically engaged. Like Spiegelman, Kundera follows Beckett in saying *something*, despite the acknowledgment that whatever narrative is constructed will have tenuous ties to "reality" and will have ideological repercussions. This is perhaps most clear when Kundera identifies the idea of "justice for all" as an idyll, an impossible dream.

I emphasize: *idyll* and *for all*, because all human beings have always aspired to an idyll, to that garden where nightingales sing, to that realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man and man against other men, but rather where the world and all men are shaped from one and the same matter. There, everyone is a note in a sublime Bach fugue, and anyone who refuses to be one is a mere useless and meaningless dot that need only be caught and crushed between thumb and finger like a flea. (*The Book* 11; emphasis in original)

In typical postmodern fashion, Kundera denies any totalizing narrative, even a master narrative that is premised on equality (like that of liberal humanism), because, like liberal humanism, the closed circle of the idyll will not only exclude, but will also "crush" those it does not encompass. The postmodern double-bind is also evident, however. If a world where man does *not* rise against other men is merely a master narrative then violence and oppression themselves remain inevitable.

Both Kundera and Spiegelman acknowledge and emphasize the possible ideological complicity of their hybridized historical fictions. They do so not to offer their own myths or “idylls” to live by, it seems, but rather to posit “the world as ambiguity, [...] not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths [...] to have as one’s only certainty the *wisdom of uncertainty*”(Art of the Novel 6). Kundera, in particular, does not allow this “wisdom of uncertainty” to lead to political paralysis, but instead seems to offer uncertainty itself as something of a political goal. In the above quotation and elsewhere, Kundera seems to conclude that it is certainty itself, not the particular ideological formations of totalitarian Communism or fascism, that lead to oppression, and that the foregrounding of epistemological uncertainty, postmodernism’s bailiwick, destabilizes, without eliminating, the possibility of the co-opting of knowledge, memory, history, and identity for and by power.

It is this construction of instability and uncertainty as an ethics in itself that has permeated recent efforts to establish poststructuralism and postmodern fiction as ethical, despite its usual resistance to concrete political positioning. As Simon Critchley explores in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Derridean poststructuralism is ethical in its insistence on seeing the “Other” (that which is outside) as “other” (incomprehensible, irreducibly different) rather than as a means of constructing meaning. Andrew Gibson likewise sees

the ethic of postmodern fiction in its insistence on maintaining alterity rather than attempting to explain or make sense of its subject matter. For Gibson the ethics of postmodern fiction lie in its ability to “indicate[] the finitude of ontological discourse, its lack of purchase on the real” (63).

As Charles Molesworth observes, however, Kundera’s commitment to the wisdom of uncertainty itself constitutes something of an idyll, a unifying belief, and that is the belief in the novel itself. As Kundera asserts, “The world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call the *spirit of the novel*” (*Art of the Novel* 14; emphasis in original). Here, the spirit of the novel is opposed to the spirit of the world outside of it, with the former valorizing uncertainty while the latter promotes its opposite.

For Kundera, it is not necessarily what is contained in a novel’s narrative that contains liberatory opportunities, but rather it is the multivocal heterogeneity of perspective that the novel’s form encompasses that creates a relativism that leads to wisdom. In this, Kundera resembles the Bakhtin of *The Dialogic Imagination*. Throughout his novels and his books of essays, *The Art of the Novel* and *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera continually offers the novel as that which offers the wisdom of

uncertainty, that which poses questions rather than answers them. In doing so, he tries to, more or less successfully, occupy the border between univocal meaning and meaningless chaos, while paradoxically promoting his own ideology of politically committed uncertainty.

Spiegelman is less confident about the power of his text to have any political or social utility. Spiegelman, as we have seen, foregrounds not only the ideological atrocities of fascism, but also the ideological dangers of reconstructed Jewish memory. In doing so, he does not seem to offer uncertainty itself as a solution, but, in *Maus* at times, withdraws from representation altogether. Where *The Book* ends on “The Border” offering an uncertain balancing between meaning and meaninglessness, the *Maus* books end with a statement of the inadequacy of representation. In the final panels, Vladek lies in bed and tells Artie, “I’m tired from talking, Richieu, and it’s enough stories for now...” (*Maus II* 136). Richieu is the name of Artie’s brother, killed during the Holocaust, whose story was never completed. At the same time, Spiegelman, via Vladek, seems to proclaim the inadequacy of all stories, not only to explain the Holocaust, but to represent them as well. Where Kundera offers an alternative to history in the novel itself (and the history of the European novel) and its potential for multivocal, dialogic discourse, Spiegelman, at the close of *Maus*, seems less willing to offer an alternative at all. While

providing a voice for Vladek, Spiegelman is never sure what political and social purpose this postmodern construction of self-reflexive narration can serve. Joshua Brown offers that “Spiegelman has created a history that is compelling in its portrayal of the Holocaust and in its consistent analysis of the hazards and holes in the reconstruction of history” (108). In the end, however, Spiegelman seems unsure of the possibility of avoiding the “hazards and holes,” even if these ideological pitfalls are consistently analyzed. *The Book* finds a measure of narrative comfort in its position on “The Border” between meaning and meaninglessness. *Maus* never offers us that comfort.

The pairing of these two texts, then, illustrates two prevailing contemporary readings of postmodernity in general and postmodernist fiction in particular. While critics like Gibson and Critchley find a certain ethics in the “withdrawal from the real” (similar to Kundera’s “wisdom of uncertainty”) found in works that stress the difficulty in attempting to find a real outside the text, others are concerned that the abandonment of ontology or a stress on the “finitude of ontological discourse” places postmodernist works outside of social and historical praxis. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra questions the poststructural historiography of critics like Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit precisely because of their incapacity to acknowledge the real historical events (like the Holocaust) that are so central to communal identity formation or radical

politics precisely *as* real, or theoretically independent of retrospective textual construction.

While Kundera's and Spiegelman's novels refuse to allow an uncritical acceptance of memory as the real and presence as opposed to the constructedness of the past through historical discourse, they also underline through Mirek's and Artie's marshaling of memory against power, the dangers of a complete relativizing of the real or a removal of the real into the realm of the sublime or the impossible to attain. Both authors' works stress the importance of maintaining a sense of the true and the factual while acknowledging and foregrounding how history and memory both become deeply textual stories without direct access to truth. In doing so, they stress the significant importance of the debate over history and memory in the postmodern age. While it is possible to construct a hypothetical ethics in radical alterity and the sublimity of uncertainty, when true events or historical facticity are essential in constructing a community identification or a radical politics, such uncertainty seems unsatisfactory. If the "wisdom of uncertainty" is then untenable within social praxis and representation is itself falsifying and prone to abuse of power as we have seen illustrated in both Kundera and Spiegelman, these texts suggest the need for a new way to configure the real as an

accessible way to found identity and fight power without proffering it as an inviolable idyll that excludes and abuses.

Postmodernist Historical Fiction and Finding the Real

While *Maus* and *The Book* denaturalize the differences often proffered between memory and history, they also pinpoint the need for a method of accessing the past, of “finding the real” that cannot be summarily dismissed as purely discursive construction. If memory and history are, in fact, more alike than different, does this then mean that both are merely constructions of the individual or communal mind and that their sole function is in the administration of power? Both Mirek’s and Artie’s reliance on and adherence to a past that would be constitutive of resistance and radical politics suggests that this is not the case, although *how*, precisely, the past and its material/ontological existence can be accessed for the purposes of political radicalism or for the development of an ethics, whether local or universal, is not clear from a study of these novels and the criticism they have engendered.⁴⁶ It would, of course, be the height of egotism to assert a foolproof and watertight methodological approach towards such complicated and vexed issues. We must not content ourselves, however, with simply viewing texts like *Maus* and *The Book* as quintessential examples of postmodernist relativism, because they, like

the other books I will explore in this study, are centrally concerned with exploring, suggesting, and asserting means of representation that successfully access the historical past, even as they undercut and provisionalize traditional methods of doing so.

Indeed, while it is often assumed that a materialist orientation towards history is necessarily a retrograde and reactionary position, I suggest that the opposite can be, and often is, the case.⁴⁷ Certainly a naively traditional approach to history that views its standard presentation as transparently mimetic does not allow for the exposure of rhetoric, propaganda, and ideology often just beneath its surface. It is, however, equally problematic to categorically deny the possibility that an accurate presentation of the past is possible, for this suggests that any claims about it are equally valid or not valid at all.

Norman Geras voices this objection eloquently in the *New Left Review*,

If there is no truth, there is no injustice...if truth is wholly relativized or internalized to particular discourses or language games [...] there is no injustice [...]. The victims and protestors of any putative injustice are deprived of their last and often best weapon, that of telling what really happened. They can only tell their story, which is something else. Morally and politically, therefore, anything goes. (qtd. in Jenkins 23)

While Mirek and Artie's attempts to recover the past are in reaction to specific threats, they also call to mind Geras's concerns. Both have seen or heard of injustice on a monumental scale and the need to present "what really happened" in opposition to such injustice is a powerful one.

Unfortunately, much postmodernist fiction (and art in general) is either celebrated or eviscerated for its relativizing function, that is, for its tendency to reject the possibility of telling “what really happened” and instead to insist only on the possibility of “telling [one’s] story,” emphasizing the constructed nature of art, rather than its capacity for reproducing the past. As Geras suggests, such a position eliminates the possibility of any type of impartial justice. I suggest that such an assessment of much postmodernist fiction, particularly for what I am calling “postmodernist historical fiction,” is misleading. By looking at three texts as primary exemplars, Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, Graham Swift’s *Waterland*, and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, we can see how postmodernist historical fiction insists upon, rather than denies, the possibility of historical referentiality and provides us with possible modes of representation that more precisely access the real. All three of these texts have been both praised and criticized for their imbrication in the postmodern gestalt and their denaturalization, demystification, and deconstruction of traditional historical representation. While all of these texts, like *Maus* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, do problematize traditional modes of historical representation, they do so not to eliminate the possibility of representation that accesses the past, but to suggest that traditional narrative models are contributors to deviations and deformations of the past, rather than effective means to access the real.

These historical novels insist on the possibility of access to the “real” of the past precisely because such access is a political and ethical necessity. Woolf’s *Between the Acts* insists on the possibility of accessing a past that is not only different from the great narratives of great men but also more accurate. For Woolf, this provides a foundation for feminist intervention not based purely on an equal epistemological status for women’s stories, but rather on a reliance on a truer version of the past. Likewise, Swift’s *Waterland* argues for alternative ways of conceiving of the “real,” precisely so that the experience of the working classes, not easily transformed into traditional narrative history, becomes available. Like Woolf, Swift insists on the historical accessibility of the working classes so that their treatment in the present cannot be similarly erased. Finally, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* insists on a way of looking at the past that allows for an abundance of stories *and* an insistence upon access to the real, particularly within a postcolonial context in which the subaltern experience is often suppressed or forgotten within colonialist histories. Rushdie too insists upon access to the materiality of the subaltern past not purely as an alternative story but as a truth that colonialism and postcolonialism threatens to efface. Not only do the political and ethical concerns of the three novels overlap, they also insist upon historical access as a prerequisite to their variably radical politics. At the same time, however, they formally foreground the

complexity and difficulty of historical reference whereas much traditional historical representation does not. This leads to unorthodox modes of presentation designed both to suggest the difficulty of accessing the past and the possibility and necessity of doing so.

As discussed above, the most commonly identified ideological appropriation of history *and* memory takes place within the process of narrative emplotment, that is, the transformation of events into stories that serve a particular purpose. It is no surprise then that common to all of the texts discussed in depth in this study is their resistance to narrative as the primary mode of historical representation. All offer modes of nonnarratability or anti-narrativity as the primary means of accessing historical reality, suggesting that while narrativizing may be natural to the human condition, it is not, perhaps, the best or most accurate way to indicate the presence of the past. This aversion to narrative, or at least to its capacity for historical reference, reflects the career-long concerns of Hayden White and other historical theorists variously labeled narrativist, postmodernist, or constructivist historiographers. White proves to be a useful paradigmatic example in this case both for his central place within the discourse and debate over historical reference in the past thirty years, and for the degree to which his persistent probing of the limits of representation and narrative are both predicted, reflected, and finally diverged from by the works of postmodernist historical fiction this

study encompasses. For this reason, it is useful to look closely at White and how narrative takes a central place in the quest for historical objectivity.

The relationship between narrativity and material reference in historical discourse is not immediately obvious and merits some explanation. The very notion that historical representation might be largely deviant from the past itself is now commonsensical but was, for quite some time, undertheorized. Peter Novick's book *That Noble Dream* chronicles the efforts of the American historical profession to achieve the "dream" of objectivity in historical reportage, as well as the countervailing tendency to deny objectivity and insist on some version of relativism. Here, it is important to note the fundamental difference between "objectivity" and "impartiality," the former referring to the capacity of historians to correctly and accurately reproduce or present the "object" that is the past itself, while the latter indicating the idea of ideological neutrality. While the latter has nearly always been a stated goal of the historical profession despite the large and long deviations from that goal, the goal of objectivity has been less consistently delineated or defined. Instead, it has often been assumed. Still, relativism within American historiography is not a recent development, but goes back to the time following World War I, particularly in the nineteen-thirties, wherein philosophical and theoretical objections to the possibility of objectivity were substantial.⁴⁸ The backlash that followed,

reasserting objectivity, was followed by a stronger surge of relativism, which resulted, according to Novick, in an “Objectivity in Crisis” for which White has become the central symbol and spokesperson.⁴⁹

While narrativism in historiography precedes White,⁵⁰ his approach, as mentioned above, is most suggestive for the insights to be gained from postmodernist historical fiction. His most important works, the introduction to *Metahistory* and the influential essays reprinted in *Tropics of Discourse*, *The Content of the Form*, and *Figural Realism*, approach the formal presentation of history, particularly language and narrative, seriously and analyze its effects on objectivity rigorously, in particular noting how narrative, traditionally conceived, obscures the possibility of historical objectivity. This, too, is the case with all of the novels included in this study, although the conclusions they derive from their critique of narrative differ from those of White, arguing *for* a possible objectivity in forms other than narrative where White argues for these forms without making claims for their objectivity.

Preceding White by some forty years, Charles Beard’s nineteen-thirties definition of relativism both expresses the commonality of early and late-century historical relativism and pinpoints some key differences. When Beard writes that “every historian’s work— that is, his selection of facts, his emphasis, his omissions, his

organization and his methods of presentation—bears a relation to his own personality and the age of circumstances in which he lives. This is relativism” (qtd. in Novick *Noble Dream* 26), he sounds very much like White, who later focuses on selections, omissions and erasures within any historian’s work. Beard, however, is less concerned with the “methods of presentation,” which occupy only one place in a several item list of inevitably relativistic modes of historicism. White, and many like him, focus more substantially on the methods of presentation, particularly narrative, but language itself as well. As a result, whereas the earlier movement focused on recent theories in the sciences and social sciences, the most common point of comparison for White and his contemporaries, is between history and literature. As Arthur Danto noted fairly early within the movement. “The difference between history and science is not that history does and science does not employ organizing schemes which go beyond what is given. Both do. The difference has to do with the *kind* of organizing schemes employed by each. *History* tells stories” (qtd. in Mink 45). Here, the crucial specification of history as storytelling is given center stage and the possibility of historical reference within fiction is suggested if only by a perverse inversion of properties.

Before more clearly defining the critique of narrative undertaken by White, and reflected in various forms of postmodernist historical fiction, it is important to define

precisely what narrativism means by narrative, as well as how the term will be used throughout this study. Although the entire field of narrative theory is, at least partially, devoted to defining narrative and its attendant parts, there is some level of agreement on the bare-bones definition of narrative. For my purposes, Lawrence Stone's definition proves particularly useful. In his own efforts to theorize historical discourse, Stone writes, "Narrative is taken to mean the organization of material into a chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots" (qtd. in Berkhofer 27). In this definition of narrative, although the linear presentation (*sjuzet* or discourse) of material may not be strictly necessary or even rigidly possible, the precession of events (what has been called the story itself or *fabula*) should be presented to the reader as a chronological series of events that is invested with meaning, often based on its conclusion.⁵¹ It also focuses on narrative as a structuring and organizing principle which excludes or omits all events or information that does not fit into its "coherent story." It is this focus on organization and coherence that, as we shall see, lends itself to relativist critique. Also central to many definitions of narrative and its common bedfellow, plot is the notion of causality. Here, despite Danto's claim that history is composed of "stories," the distinction E. M. Forster makes between story and plot is important. Forster claims that story merely delineates a "narrative of events

arranged in their time-sequence (e.g. “The king died and then the queen died,” while “plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality” (“The king died, and then the queen died of grief”) (Forster 86; see also Richardson, *Narrative Dynamics* 58).

In the context of the debate over objectivity in historical narrative, Forster’s argument that story serves merely to answer the question “and then?” while plot serves to answer the question “why?” is an important one, because plot, in this construction, serves to *explain* how events occur, to bring them into comprehensibility and order. White’s critique of narrative as a mode of historical representation is closely tied to its explanatory function. If, then, a story could be constructed that did not have Forster’s “plot” per se, one might escape the relativist critique based on its explanatory function.

Later developments in narrative theory, however, serve to dissolve the distinction Forster makes between story and plot in a manner that solidifies narrative’s explanatory function and leaves it, therefore, further open to relativist critique. Likewise, any distinction between plot and narrative itself becomes difficult to maintain within later incarnations of narrative theory. Seymour Chatman, in a critique of Forster, asserts that any linear presentation of events leads the reader to *assume* causality, even where it is not apparent, indicating the explanatory capacity of any story or narrative and that plot is therefore inherent to linear presentation. Peter Brooks’s later definition of plot as the

“dynamic shaping force of the narrative discourse,” (13) indicates the inseparability of plot and story or either from a strict definition of narrative, which in turn asserts the thoroughgoing presence and influence of the explanatory capacity of plot and narrative. Brooks takes his cue from Paul Ricoeur who notes that plot “*makes events into a story* [...] places us at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity” (qtd. in Brooks 14). Viewing plot as a dynamic force rather than a static component of a story makes causation, even where not explicitly obvious, inherent to narrative. That is, plot and narrative become virtually inseparable, and both assume and deploy causation as their explanatory mode.

It is precisely the capacity of plot to “make events into stories” that triggers White’s influential species of historical relativism. Since White considers the idea that reality presents itself as narrative to be, a “wish,” a “desire,” or a “fantasy,” (in short anything but the actual case), the transformation of events into stories has nothing to do with an attainment of historical accuracy. Indeed, White expresses a preference of sorts for pre-narrative modes of historical presentation like annals and chronicles precisely because they do not provide the illusion of structure which did not, and could not have, existed in events themselves.

Annals merely present a list of events in chronological order, the chronicle “starts out to tell a story but breaks off *in media res*, in the chronicler’s own present” eliminating the possibility of a conclusion, which often functions to provide the “explanation” or summing up of the meaning of all that has come before. So, whereas narrative presents reality as if it displays the form of a story, annals, according to White, “represent historical reality *as if* real events did not display the form of story, the chronicle represents it *as if* real events appeared to human consciousness in the form of *unfinished* stories” (“Value ” 5). Most importantly, White asserts that while conventional historiography assumes the identity between history and narrative (that is, no real history exists without a narrative component), White asserts that such a relationship is completely “conventional” and that, in fact, the rhetorical positioning of “the real,” the “true” as equivalent to the “narratable” is merely a matter of discursive construction.

The postmodernist historical fiction examined in this study similarly critiques the capacity of narrative to obscure access to the past as it existed, but, although it is often read *as if* it promotes a thoroughgoing relativism, it instead provides this critique in order to suggest alternative forms as more effective ways of accessing the real. White offers that our notion of historical reality is itself constructed from the form in which it is almost universally offered, and that our conception of what reality is would no doubt be

completely different if we operated within a society in which, for instance, annals, chronicles, or some form heretofore unexplored were the preferred mode of presentation. In this, he suggests that, in essence, the media is the message, that any conception of reality can only be a product of its discursive construction. By contrast, the works of postmodernist historical fiction examined here insist on the capacity of representation to access the real, even as they perform a critique of narrative and language every bit as complex as White's.

If we return to the mechanics of White's critique of narrative, it is clear that while he acknowledges that the sequential nature of annals, per Chatman, do produce a de-facto kind of narrative, it also leaves gaps in its narrative that it makes no attempt to fill, the continuous listing of years for which there are no corresponding events. In this, White pinpoints narrative's function, to pull together disparate events and to give the impression that they are all related and form a whole:

the presence of these blank years in the annalist's account permits us to perceive, by way of contrast, the extent to which narrative strains to produce the effect of having filled in all the gaps, to put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time. ("Value" 11)

In this, White's view of narrative's function reflects that of history suggested by Fritz Grillparzer, the Viennese dramatist, reproduced by Nietzsche, again stressing the seemingly inevitable connection between history and its common form of presentation.

What is history but the way in which the spirit of man apprehends *events impenetrable to him*: unites things when God alone knows whether they belong together; substitutes something comprehensible for what is incomprehensible; imposes his concept of purpose from without upon a whole which, if it possesses a purpose, does so only inherently; and assumes the operation of chance where a thousand little causes have been at work. (Nietzsche 91; see also Lane 456)

Like Grillparzer and Nietzsche, White sees narrative history as strategy of comfort in a world that offers none, a theme that recurs often in Swift's *Waterland*. White argues that while both annals and narratives select certain events to include while omitting many others, narrative gives the impression of a unified whole with no exclusions or erasures, in which the past makes sense and all events are connected. White is careful, finally, to note that annals too give the impression that all events are connected, if by nothing else, than by the implication of divine providence, but the chronicle, and finally, the narrative do an even better job of suggesting that events happen for particular reasons, all connected, and therefore operate as if according to some law. Here White draws from Hegel, who argues, previous to de Certeau, that "History" refers both to the objective (the past itself) and the subjective (its narration), but Hegel sees the "union of the two meanings [...] as of a higher order than mere outward accident"

(qtd. in White, “Value of Narrativity” 11). That is, Hegel sees the dual meanings of the term as an indication of their natural or essential union, and that it is the state itself, or the Law, that produces history, both in action and in its narration. For White, by contrast, the union of the two meanings in a single term (“history”) is purely rhetorical and indicates how narration, particularly in its implication of unity and order, is imbricated within and part of the production of “law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, *authority*” (“Value” 13; emphasis in original). Narrative’s capacity to make what may be random or ideologically complicit choices of events for presentation *seem* natural, whole, or inviolate is, to White, a means of naturalizing the social order, of legitimating the law. “narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine” (14).

The notion presented here, that the narrative form is a means of legitimating conventional morality, may be a questionable one, as undoubtedly events could be selected and narrativized to suggest amorality as a meaning and goal of life if one wished to do so. The broader point, however, is more compelling. The unifying tendency of narrative, its tendency to exclude and select while simultaneously providing the

impression of natural and transparent meaning, obfuscates the barriers to accessing the reality of the past and, in so doing, may provide an even stronger barrier than we might suspect. That is, by obscuring the large degree of selection, exclusion and erasure that any account of the historical past must partake of, it discourages the pursuit of knowledge of those events and personages which have been excluded. Likewise, if such events are to be recovered and presented within a narrative form, they must be made to fit a broader “meaning” or explanation to which they otherwise might be inimical.

White’s assertion that we only identify something as “real” if it is “remembered” and “capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence” (“Value” 19), drives his point home; the notion of “reality” is itself a discursive construction. In our society, suggests White, something is only “historical” if it has been remembered (itself a questionable assessment of reality, given the manipulability of memory) and if it can be fit comfortably into a narrative, which is itself an explanation of the past that implies coherence. Reality, then, according to White, is seen as unified and coherent precisely because this is what our lives (and history) are not and because this is what we most fervently desire. It is a small step to suggest that narrative falsifies events even if they “truly” happened, although White never quite makes this assertion.⁵² Again, these ideas are similarly explored in the works of postmodernist historical fiction I examine within

this study, although with a difference. These texts work to seek those parts of the past not encompassed by the tyrannies of sequence, memory, and coherence, in order to more accurately present the past without laying a claim to total Truth or inviolate meaning that would reproduce the unifying function of narrative.

Overall, what White emphasizes here is the capacity narration and plot have to transform actual events into stories, full of causality, progress and meaning where none is inherently present. His focus on tropology in the introduction to *Metahistory* also reflects the poststructural emphasis on the incapacity of language to refer to material objects or their past which came to dominate a large portion of relativist historiography. As White sagely notes, “The fall into legend is the price science pays to myth for the use of language” (qtd. in Vann “Turning Linguistic” 62; see White “The Abiding Relevance”), suggesting that language itself precludes the supposed aims of history, a point of view presented somewhat more elliptically by the big names of French poststructuralism, particularly Jacques Derrida. Within historiographic discourse there has been a wide-ranging debate about both narrativism and the linguistic turn.⁵³ It is also important to note that some of this debate has been both pre-figured and reproduced in such discourses as feminist theory and postcolonial theory (in both cases, the work of Gayatri Spivak is relevant), both of which are intimately concerned with issues of materiality versus

discursive construction. Some of these debates are noted and explored in the chapters that follow wherein both feminist and postcolonial concerns are foregrounded in relation to the novels under discussion. The importance of a critique of narrative *and* an insistence on the access to the material past to feminism are evident particularly in *Between the Acts*, but also in *Waterland*, while their similar importance in relation to colonial and subaltern histories are suggested in all three texts, but most pervasively in *Midnight's Children*.

While various proponents and opponents of historical narrativism specifically, and relativism in general, are given fuller voice in some of the chapters that follow, most important to my own claims is the degree to which the narrativists have won the battle, but lost a significant element in the war, at least within the field of historiography. In terms of the philosophy of history, White's *Metahistory* may be the most influential book of the twentieth century, even if the influence is largely, according to Peter Novick, outside of the historical profession itself. Indeed, the spread of the "linguistic turn" in general and postmodern historiographic theory in particular has led Nancy Partner to ask if "the impact of non-referential language theory, deconstruction and the exposure of hegemonic interests embedded in what used to pass for natural description left the ancient discipline [of history] shattered beyond recuperation" (21).

Partner's response to her own rhetorical question is, typically, in the negative. She observes that "the 'linguistic turn' was a revolving door and that everyone went around and around and got out exactly where they got in" (22). That is, while anyone who gives serious thought to the matter seems to acknowledge that linguistic, social, and narrative construction prevent unmediated access to the past, historians whose business is the reporting of the past rather than the theorizing of that reporting "carry on in all essential ways as though nothing had changed since Ranke, or Gibbon for that matter: as though invisible guardian angels of epistemology would always spread protecting wings over facts, past reality" (Partner 22). Historians, then, tend to acknowledge the theoretical limits of their profession, yet continue to present history in a discourse that implies unmediated access to the past. Indeed, Hans Kellner argues that even the most theoretically-minded historians are prone to sliding into a "realist" posture, arguing that "the ghost of naive realism haunts all of us, however much we deny it" ("Introduction," 10). That is, while many historians (like Partner) argue that the "postmodern" skepticism towards language's ability to represent the past is not postmodern at all, but has been typical of the profession since at least Ancient Greece, it is equally true that the discourse of historicism frequently ignores this skepticism.

While there have been spirited defenses of both the possibility of historical objectivity and narrative's capacity to transmit such objectivity, what is of central interest to me here is the way that postmodernist historical fiction expresses just such a skepticism towards narrative's capacity to represent the past. However, the common critical approach to such skepticism has been an assessment of such texts as denying the possibility of historical reference instead of a focus on their critique of narrative itself as a barrier to reference. White's critical fortunes, in this regard, mirror that of the novels I will discuss. White is often excoriated for denying the possibility of historical objectivity when, in fact, this is not his primary goal. Instead, his work functions primarily as a critique of a particular form of representation, that of narrative, and as an advocacy for different forms. It is, indeed, often White's central point not only that discourse deforms referentiality, but that history should reflect the knowledge of this deformation, not ignore it. It is not surprising then that White's greatest reception has been among literary scholars who see such awareness not within "history" proper, but in historical fiction like that of Kundera, Spiegelman, and the other writers examined in this study.

The clearest expression of White's argument for different forms occurs in the early "The Burden of History," which reflects some of the concerns aired by Nietzsche and Foucault about the problems with contemporary historical representation. White,

likewise, calls for a radical change in historical presentation to break free of the tropology of historical discourse and “to participate positively in the liberation of the present from *the burden of history*” (41; emphasis in original). By this, White means that the myth of the possibility of objective presentation of historical facts has confined the writing of historical narrative to a “realistic” framework that identifies “the *sole possible form of historical narration*” as that used in “the English novel as it had developed by the late nineteenth century” (“Burden” 44; emphasis in original), or that of “realistic” narrative. In this, White critiques the failure of historians to employ the narrative methods, or “techniques of literary representation,” of the great modernists “Joyce, Yeats and Ibsen” (“Burden” 43), and encourages the use of “surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography” (43) and the “plunder of psychoanalysis, cybernetics, game theory, and the rest” (47). The novels I discuss in this study, like many of the great novels of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, are characterized stylistically by their rejection of linear, “realistic” narrative and its embrace of recursive, circular, self-reflexive and heavily subjective narration, or indeed the refusal of narrative itself. White calls for these experimental innovations⁵⁴ in historiography as a means of acknowledging the futility of recapturing the past in a means that is “literally truthful” and instead claims that “they can be judged solely in terms of the richness of the metaphors which govern its

sequence of articulation” (“Burden” 46). White’s critique of the realistic, traditional narrative form leads him, in this essay at least, to promote history as art, to be judged not by its capacity for objectivity but by its linguistic richness.

Postmodernist historical fiction makes a similar advocacy for different linguistic forms and particularly non-narrative approaches, but insists forcefully that a different form may allow us access to the real itself, rather than merely creating a different discursive formation of reality. It does so by suggesting that where narrative obscures or falsifies reality while laying claim to it, models of non-narratability and anti-narrativity give us such access without claiming unity and coherence, thus avoiding the type of obfuscation inherent to the narrative form. Each text I discuss gives a different model of non-narratability or anti-narrativity, but all deny narrative as a feasible model for representing the past accurately.

As I have endeavored to define narrative, it is also necessary to define terms such as non-narratability and anti-narrativity more rigorously. Simplistically, of course, a definition of non-narrative or anti-narrative would be based upon a point-for-point rejection of standard definitions of narrative, like that of Stone. In particular, this means the rejection of sequential organization and all that this implies, particularly the uninterrupted movement from past to present, the frequently asserted fundamental

separation of past from present, and any notion of progress or teleology. Likewise, non-narrative or anti-narrative, like the chronicle, refuses the comfort and explanation of conclusions, closures, or teleology. Also, what I am calling non-narrative or anti-narrative refuses the principles of selection, elision, and erasure that allows the homogenization of the disparate elements of the past into a single, unified, story. While postmodernist historical fiction cannot include *every* event or personage in a particular segment of the past, they work hard to prevent alternative events to traditional histories and/or events that are not easily integrated in a singular narrative. Most importantly, postmodernist historical fiction uses nonnarrative devices to express and access the real, not merely to explore the “richness of metaphors.”

Throughout this study, I use several terms to delineate separate elements or specific characteristics of nonnarrative. Foremost among these are the “nonnarratable” and the “anti-narrative.” For nonnarratability, I draw principally from narrative theorists like D. A. Miller (*Narrative and Its Discontents*) and Peter Brooks (*Reading for the Plot*) who assert that in order for a narrative to commence or be sustained, an event or situation must occur that brings instability or disequilibrium to a relatively stable situation. As such, it requires life and/or mind altering circumstances that inalterably separate the moment narrative begins from its nonnarratable past. One strategy used in postmodernist

historical fiction to access the real of the past is to focus on the nonnarratable, the period devoid of life-altering “events,” or, at the very least, between two or more such events, providing a period of little change as it is traditionally defined, presenting more continuity between past and present than discontinuity and therefore suggesting the possibility of accessing the past through the repeated and recursive present. Nora’s claim for the “continuous present” that memory provides has a parallel here, although memory itself is rarely viewed in postmodernist historical fiction as the medium through which the real of the continuous present can be accessed.

I use the term anti-narrative, by contrast, to refer to events so strange, incomprehensible, or inexplicable that they are impossible to comfortably fit into the unity, coherence, and comfort of narrative unity. While narrative is sustained and carried forward by life or world changing events that stimulate its existence and then must be resolved or explained through its processes and conclusions, some of these events cannot be explained by narrative and cannot fit comfortably into whatever meaning the conclusion seems to provide. The existence of such events is common to the works examined here, particularly in Woolf’s idea of “Moments of Being” expressed in her A “Sketch of the Past,” but also evident in a novel like *Between the Acts*, as well as in Graham Swift’s delineation of the concept of the “Here and Now” in *Waterland*. This is

one version of the idea of the “historical sublime” discussed by Ann Rigney in her book *Imperfect Histories* and by Hans Kellner in a recent article in *PMLA* (“However Imperceptibly”). Kellner refers to the inexplicability of certain actions and their causes and notes the responsibility of the historian to express that inexplicability in both form and content.⁵⁵ Kellner refers negatively to the “beautification by explanation” inherent to narrative, but does not suggest, as postmodernist historical fiction does, that the avoidance of such beautification may lead us closer to the truth. Like White, he advocates a form of anti-narrativity inspired by the historical sublime without giving it any epistemological privilege. Works like *Between the Acts* and *Waterland* do give it that privilege and present a compelling logic and ethics for doing so that is important to consider.

Rushdie’s version of anti-narrativity is somewhat different. His focus on the “errata” that are generated by his narrative but are not explicitly part of it indicates a skepticism towards the capacity of narrative to access and/or reproduce the past in its fullness and the subsequent need for the inclusion of events, personages, or ideas outside of a unifying narrative construct. Although such events, for him, are not necessarily sublime in the same way as “Moments of Being” or the “Here and Now,” they do provide a way of avoiding the “beautification” inherent to narrative. The dialectic nature of the

nonnarratable and anti-narrative are most clear in Swift's *Waterland* which explicitly deals with the theorization of history, but both of the other novels considered at length partake of both of these versions of nonnarrative.

Finally, I use terms like narratability and hypernarratability to express the antagonists to ideas of nonnarrativity and anti-narrativity. An event is narratable if it stimulates narrative desire and creates the disequilibrium necessary to generate a narrative. Likewise, it is narratable if it fits easily into a unified sequential procession that provides formal unity and coherence. It is hypernarratable, in this context, if its narratability seems parodically extreme, stimulating a wealth of stories and providing the fulfillment of unity and coherence almost too easily in the manner of a cheap romance or compulsively rigorous detective novel. Swift and Rushdie, in particular, make use of such events to provide a stark contrast to their nonnarratable and anti-narrative strains.

While this overview of the terms, debates and conditions of narrativism has focused largely on historiography and the historical profession, the remainder of the dissertation does expand the scope somewhat. In particular, I position the works of postmodernist historical fiction against such poststructural theorists as Derrida and Paul de Man, and within the debates over materialism and discursive construction common to feminist and postcolonial history. Primarily, I examine how works of postmodernist

historical fiction have been commonly placed into the relativist camp when they do not comfortably fit into such a category. The defining of these texts as “postmodernist” and therefore relativist has blunted their social, political, and ethical concerns, something which I address in the chapters that follow. Such claims have been made before, particularly by critics like Satya Mohanty who argues for the creation of a category of postpositivist realism illustrated primarily through Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and by Michel Rolf-Trouillot who traces the importance of silences in accessing the past. My own innovation is principally in the marriage of narrative theory and high theory and the effort to align efforts at historical reference to the refusal of narrativity.

All of the works discussed in this study follow this path, although in very different ways. In this, they refuse the two common options offered by Kundera and Spiegelman, the embracing of the “wisdom of uncertainty” and the retreat from representation. Kundera and Spiegelman’s work illustrates the susceptibility of memory to emplotment and its questionable status as a reparative to history. Instead, postmodernist historical fiction offers nonnarrative modes of representation as a means to access the past. In this, they refuse White’s espousal of the “fictions of factual representation” and replace it with a version of the facts available through fictional representation. While I do not claim that these fiction writers have untied the Gordian

knot of historical reference, these works of fiction do have much to teach us about the social, political, and ethical importance of maintaining the possibility of accessing the materiality of the past, and about the formal capacity for doing so.

Notes

¹ Lyotard takes the idiosyncratic position that the postmodern actually precedes the modern. He observes that the (post)modern takes place in the realization that neither narrative nor scientific discourse can present an objective truth. The modern displays a nostalgia, or a longing, for the previous era's belief in a totalizing system by which to understand the world. The postmodern accepts, even embraces, the relativist new era. Although Lyotard's definition is far from the only assessment of the postmodern, the characteristic of a retreat from an "essential" and coherent belief system is standardly associated with postmodernism with either positive or negative connotations (or both) depending on the critic.

² It is in this sense that I see poststructuralist deconstruction as a practice related to postmodernism as a site of theoretical exchange. Both emphasize the impossibility of accessing a foundational or essential truth. Deconstruction does so by revealing the contradictions and "supplementary" logic of the central texts of western metaphysics (and literature) while postmodern theory in the mode of Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson posit the current age as that of lost metanarratives (Lyotard) and the dissolution of the difference between the simulation (the textual representation) and the real (Baudrillard). Of course, these (largely Marxist and post-Marxist) theorists take different positions on the desirability of this historical development, with Jürgen Habermas (fairly consistently) advocating a return to the values and philosophical approach of the Enlightenment, and Jameson (at times) displaying a nostalgia for a less fragmented and historically amnesiac time. Lyotard, of course, sees the dissolution of master narratives as a positive and necessary development, while Baudrillard (in his later work) seems to apocalyptically accept and embrace the development of signification without referent. Common to all of them, however, is the sense that, as Linda Hutcheon points out, "...the master narratives of bourgeois liberalism are under attack" (*Poetics* 6).

³ Although historians almost universally condemn the claim that the Holocaust did not occur, there has been a movement to focus on the construction of the term "Holocaust" as a signifier in post World War II politics. The focus on the discursivity of the term and the political ends to which it is used does not, however, to my mind, obviate the importance of insisting on the material reality of the event itself, under whatever name.

⁴ I argue for this semi-neologism not because Hutcheon's term for similar work ("historiographic metafiction") is linguistically unwieldy (my terms are no more friendly to the tongue) but because she identifies the object under study as "metafiction,"

foregrounding the self-referential elements of the discourse more centrally than its historiographic element (which is relegated to the merely adjectival). Instead, I think it is important to locate the work within a long tradition of “historical fiction” that has an allegiance to fidelity to the past (while still taking artistic license). I also wish to allow for the possibility that not all historiographic metafiction attempts to insist upon the possibility of accessing the material past (not having studied all of its incarnations, as Hutcheon seems to have done), while what I am calling postmodernist historical fiction does make such an attempt. Indeed, it is its defining element.

⁵ I use this term (“postmodernist fiction,” borrowed from Brian McHale) as a way of suggesting some shared preoccupations with postmodern theorists like Lyotard, Baudrillard, etc. al., but not necessarily a shared discursive field. The writers I discuss are not explicitly theorizing the postmodern world, although they do share an interest in the difficulty of accessing truth, reality, and the past as a site of investigation. In their attempts to move outside the theorization of lost signification and into the realm of representing history, they call to attention the sociopolitical repercussions of the theories I have discussed, as the theorists themselves also do in different ways.

⁶ Defined here loosely as the preoccupation with the destabilization of the confidence in referentiality and a historical referent.

⁷ Although it is unfashionable to name the narrator as the author, it is also difficult in the case of *The Book* and *Maus* not to do so. Their autobiographical components make it difficult to, as we shall see, confirm these books as novels with purely fictional narrators. The distinction between fiction and reality is instead consistently challenged. If, as this article and much postmodern theory argue, reality as we perceive it is a narrative construction of sorts, the distinction becomes even less tenable.

⁸ There is much debate over the correct terminology to be used in referring to this event, especially within the Jewish community, where the term has come to be a bit of a political football. As Peter Novick recounts: “In recent years, it has been said that the word [Holocaust] is hatefully inappropriate because its original meaning was a religious sacrifice consumed by fire; it thus represents a pernicious Christianization of Jewish suffering. On these grounds...the Hebrew word for catastrophe, ‘*shoah*’ is said to be superior—a purely Jewish and purely secular term...” However, as Novick points out, “Since long before the Second World War, ‘holocaust’ in everyday usage, was almost always used to describe widespread destruction, particularly by fire, with no [...] theological freight [...]. And ‘*shoah*’ in the Hebrew Bible was repeatedly used to describe punishments visited by God on the Jews—hardly a more palatable connotation” (*Holocaust* 133). Finally, the word “holocaust” was traditionally the English translation of the Hebrew “*shoah*,” making the debate seem somewhat irresolvable and unnecessary (even if the translation is not completely accurate, as translations rarely are). My tendency is to use the English term throughout this study (as my Hebrew school days are long behind me and almost completely forgotten), although I do so with the knowledge that there is significant debate around this issue. I choose to follow Novick’s lead in

marking the debate as one of lesser importance among the many surrounding the Holocaust.

⁹ The genocide also included the killing of millions of others of various religions and ethnicities. Despite this fact, however, the Holocaust has become intensely identified with the Jewish experience.

¹⁰ See the next section of this chapter for a more thorough discussion of the differences between history, memory, and collective memory.

¹¹ In this context, Gilman takes Lopate's comments to be an example of Jewish "self-hatred." That is, where Lopate critiques an overemphasis on the Holocaust, Gilman insists on its positive centrality. Both, however, acknowledge the centrality that the memory of the Holocaust has had in practice in contemporary Jewish religious and communal identification. Novick also observes the importance of the Holocaust within folk religion (i.e. among generally irreligious American Jews), and identifies several political and social reasons for it, not the least of which are the fading theological commitment in much of contemporary American Jewry and the controversy over Israeli politics. Novick quotes a Rabbi who observes that there is nothing surprising in the (increasing) focus on the Holocaust among Jews because 'God and Israel are too controversial' (*Holocaust* 169). Novick's deconstruction of the "essential" primacy of the Holocaust in Jewish life in favor of a discursive analysis of the origins of this primacy is important and necessary, but does not reduce the importance of maintaining a firm grip on the Holocaust as an event that occurred and has impact on the present precisely because it occurred and not as a cautionary "story." Novick does question the Holocaust's contemporary utility because of its status as an extreme event, but never questions its historical facticity.

¹² Faurisson's work actually follows the initial efforts of the American "star" of Holocaust denial, Arthur Butz, whose book *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: The Case Against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry* helped inspire the Institute for Historical Review, which was devoted to uncovering the Holocaust as hoax. This touched off a brief firestorm of controversy including the publication of Holocaust Denial advertisements in many college newspapers in the early 1990's and the publication of several books that denied the deniers. For a brief account of these events, see Novick *Holocaust* 270-72.

¹³ Again, the actual threat here is rather small, as the percentage of the population who are Holocaust deniers is statistically miniscule. The mere idea that such a memory can be denied or obscured is, however, a frightening one for many Jews (and others as well).

¹⁴ This phrase is borrowed from Paul John Eakin's investigation of the art of self-representation, *Touching the World*.

¹⁵ See Richard Terdiman's fascinating *Modernity and Memory Crisis* for an account of how the lost faith in the representational capacity of memory is a

distinguishing feature of the twentieth century. Terdiman also provides a useful analysis of the parallels between the slippage of linguistic signification (in semiotic discourse) and the slippage of mnemonic signification. Memory, in the past century, is always seen to be inextricable from forgetting as direct access to past experience is consistently denied.

¹⁶ In other words, while Kundera exposes and discusses the obvious ways in which the obliteration of Clementis is a distortion of the historical record, Foucault and de Certeau assert that the erasure and silencing of facts, events, and occurrences are an unavoidable and constitutive part of unifying traditional or “classical” history. The Clementis example is merely a more obvious representative of the consistent narrative violence of which all history partakes. It is in this way that the two fundamental requirements for classical history contradict one another. It is impossible for a unifying narrative to exist and also be completely “referential.” Rather the real and its unifying narration are incompatible, according to Foucault and de Certeau.

¹⁷ See Burke, particularly the introduction and the final chapter for an account of this backlash.

¹⁸ This rather extreme assertion has been contested, of course, but it does provide a useful touchstone to the concept of “collective memory” which is largely Halbwachs’s.

¹⁹ This, likewise, ties to Baudrillard’s sense of the postmodern world in which signifier and signified, simulation and the real, are indistinguishable from one another. Here the representation (history) seems identical or at least indistinguishable from what was once considered the historical real (history).

²⁰ We might call this narrativization inevitable in the sense that, as Derrida offers, there is nothing “outside the text.” Again, the difficulty of separating the “real” from the “representation” is the key problem here, as any telling or representation of his memories turns “reality” into discourse.

²¹ Here it might be helpful to advert to Hegel’s distinctions between “memory” and “recollection.” If memory (or the intuition) is the images and feelings that exist in our past and in “the dark depths of our inner being” (§454 *Zusatz*), recollection is that process by which these memories become “our actual possession” (§454 *Zusatz*), become integrated into the ego and become part of the self. Here Mirek attempts to incorporate Zdena into his ego by erasing those parts of her that do not correspond to his image of himself. In this Hegelian conception, we might see Zdena as part of his memories, but not of his “recollection.” However, it seems that Kundera tries to break down the difference between these two Hegelian concepts, as the self becomes more of a performative construction than a synthetic creation, and “recollection” becomes less a means of identity formation and more of a narrative performance that excludes and erases, eliminating memories and truth in its quest for synthetic wholeness.

²² It may be useful to understand the psychoanalytic “return of the repressed” as itself a cultural narrative that “makes sense” of trauma. The portrayal of ethnic and cultural “haunting” is already, in one sense, an emplotment (a narrativizing or

textualizing) even before the exorcism that Sethe achieves with Beloved. *Beloved*, in Henderson's terms, is already part of the narrative of the Uncanny ("unheimlich") and the "return of the repressed." All of this, of course, refers principally to Freud's psychoanalytic theory and practice of which memory is possibly *the* key and vital element. Freud founds neurotic subjectivity in particular, and subjectivity in general substantially on traumatic (sexual) memories that have hitherto been "repressed." "We give the name of *traumas* to those impressions, experienced early and later forgotten, to which we attach such great importance in the aetiology of neuroses" (Freud *Moses and Monotheism* 72). The psychoanalytic process, then, is meant to move the subject from "repeating" (re-enacting the trauma in a different form), to remembering (recalling the trauma rather than repressing it), to "working through" the trauma. Although the exact way to "work through" the trauma is at times unclear, at least part of the process is the narration of and reintegration of the repressed event into the ego, or the subject's narrative of their own life (the "talking cure"). The therapeutic narration of the repressed event seems to me to be reflected by the "working through" that Sethe does in *Beloved*, reviving the repressed event of the murder of Beloved and re-integrating it into a new story to conquer her neuroses. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* however, it seems the urge to re-narrate and unify the ego (or the self) is an oppressive force of erasure and suppression rather than a productive "working through." While this (unavoidably reductive) account of Freudian psychoanalysis seems to suggest that the recovery of the truth and its narration are essential to a healthy subjectivity, the Kundera model suggests (along with poststructural historical accounts of history and memory discussed above) that the recovery of the "truth" and its narration are irreconcilable and that the attempt to unify the ego, particularly through narration (as seen here with Mirek) is an oppressive and exclusionary procedure. Of course, the status of "truth" is already radically brought into question in Freud, particularly through the concept of "screen memories," foundational, and at times traumatic, memories that may in fact be false memories substituted for the "true" repressed memories in the unconscious. How to identify "screen memories" from "true" memories is never completely clear and lends itself to a (post)modern "withdrawal of the real." This Freudian relativism has additionally become a central site of contestation because of Freud's willingness to deny the essential "truth" of his patients' memories of sexual molestation. Richard Terdiman chronicles Freud's initial adherence to the "facticity" of the unconscious and his later increasing inability to separate truth and "phantasy" (240-343).

²³ Although Barthes does see the photography as an "emanation of past reality," he also sees it as a barrier to memory, rather than a facilitator of it. Photographs serve as a "counter-memory" that replace memory itself rather than contribute to it and inhibit the mourning process rather than contribute to it (*Camera Lucida* 89-91).

²⁴ "The only amusing thing about it all was my existence, the existence of a man erased from history, from literary histories, and from the telephone book, of a dead man now returned to life in an amazing reincarnation to preach the great truth of astrology to hundreds of thousands of young people in a socialist country" (*The Book* 84).

²⁵ In an interview reprinted in Kundera's theoretical *Art of the Novel*, Kundera suggests that his characters are constructed from an "existential code" made of a

conglomeration of words, “For Tereza [in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*]: body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas: lightness, weight” (29).

²⁶ Increasingly, postmodern theory has attempted to deconstruct divisions between fiction and history, non-referential and referential narrative, as the quotation from Paul de Man (above) indicates. De Man, in the passage quoted, takes the most extreme postmodern position that, in fact, the real does not exist until it is represented in writing. Partially through de Man’s influence, however, it has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to claim the transparent referentiality of autobiographical narrative. In a recent effort to arrest the slippage between history and fiction, Dorrit Cohn has pointed out the generic and narratological conventions that separate the fictional from the historical, but she acknowledges that the conventions of autobiography and autobiographical novels are often indistinguishable, as in the paradigmatic case of Proust’s *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Likewise she is reluctant to consider closely the genre of what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction (and I call postmodernist historical fiction here); self-reflexive, postmodern, but simultaneously historical narratives like that of Kundera and Spiegelman.

²⁷ This is particularly the case in early twentieth century discourse about “involuntary,” spontaneous, or unconscious memories (as opposed to those willfully brought to consciousness by the subject). The idea that spontaneous memories may be more reliable (more connected to the “real”) than voluntary or conscious memories is, of course, a commonplace in Proust but makes surprising reappearances in other contexts as well. “The valorization of powerful, unconscious, involuntary, or spontaneous memories over conscious or voluntary memory by both Bergson and Proust may well constitute a strong current in the cultural unconscious of Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (Rickard 61). Likewise, the Freudian “return” of the repressed is a corresponding type of unconscious memory. Freud is not confident in the referentiality of such returning repressed memories (“Screen Memories”) and the radically postmodern view would discourage the distinction between the textual representation of conscious memory and the supposed reality of spontaneous memory. The first, at least in its re-iteration, may be as discursive as the latter, although the distinction between them highlights how difficult and complicated a problem memory is. Some events may, of course, be merely “forgotten” (perhaps because they are unimportant), others are “repressed” (because they are so important). The result to the “conscious” mind seems remarkably similar.

²⁸ The Symbolic is Lacan’s term, and is useful here in distinguishing between the “Real” (that which is beyond explanation or signification) and that which is “inside the text” (to again adopt Derrida’s formulation). For Lacan, the “Real” is that which defies explanation, causality, and signification and corresponds to Freud’s “unconscious” while adapting it to the linguistic realm (for Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language). The “Symbolic” realm, then, is discursive, subject to emplotment, and invested with meaning. The “Real” is the sublime, beyond explanation but (as its name suggests) perhaps the most completely referential despite its elusiveness. More on the application of Lacanian theory to historical representation follows in Chapters One and Two.

²⁹ The notion of the impossibility, or at least inadvisability, of referencing the Holocaust goes back at least as far as Theodor Adorno's claim that it is barbaric to write lyric poetry after the Holocaust (see Adorno, "After Auschwitz" 362) but has expanded far beyond that narrow and particular art form. Several books of essays have been devoted to this idea and it is widely circulated within Holocaust studies (which continues to churn out countless accounts of the Holocaust despite its claimed fundamental unrepresentability). Two paradigmatic examples are the collections, Lang, *Writing and the Holocaust* and Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation*. A general attitude towards representing the Holocaust is expressed by Raul Hilberg who writes, "You all remember Adorno's dictum that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. I am no poet, but the thought occurred to me that if that statement is true, then is it not equally barbaric to write footnotes after Auschwitz?" (25). Indeed, Hilberg and others insist that such an attempt is not only barbaric, but doomed to failure because of the impossibility of representing the traumatic nature of the event. Arthur Cohen notes that "there is something in the nature of thought that is alien to the enormity of the death camps," while Emil Fackenheim notes that the more the psychologist, historian, or 'psychohistorian' attempts to explain the Holocaust the more he is forced to admit its "inexplicability" (both qtd. in Seeskin 110). Of course, the typical postmodernist claim that representation itself is constitutively destined for failure makes the Holocaust just one among many events that cannot be represented, and the fact that this is so evidently true in the case of the Holocaust makes it perhaps *the* most real event and most comprehensible (in its incomprehensibility). Friedlander, indeed, calls for an "aesthetics that marks its own limitations, its inability to provide eternal answers and stable meaning" (Young 666) as the preferred type of history for the Holocaust, although he also asks for a simultaneously coherent and explanatory approach to put alongside the former. I shall return to the difficulties of these ideas both within this introduction and throughout the study.

³⁰ This is once again within a Freudian framework, where personal trauma leads to the repression of memories of that event. Here, I apply the idea loosely to a community that has a traumatic event that occurs to all in the community (at least metaphorically speaking) and is, therefore, prone to collective repression. This has become a common prism through which to view the Holocaust, particularly because of the paucity of Holocaust discourse and study in the twenty years or so following the event and the discourse's substantial "return" after that period. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra describes the Holocaust and its writing in precisely these terms. Peter Novick, on the other hand, argues substantially against such an interpretation and prefers to see the fluctuations in Holocaust consciousness (particularly in the United States) as dictated by more immediate social and political concerns.

³¹ Again, here, the Hegelian definition of "recollection" is useful. See note 21.

³² Derrida's famous deconstruction (in *Dissemination*) of writing as "pharmakon," both poison and cure, is applicable here. Although it is often writing that is trusted and valorized in much contemporary discourse, the spoken seems to hold a reservoir of immanence for many in terms of "remembering" the Holocaust.

³³ Here I am employing Neil Gotanda's terms, originally adopted in a legal context, but useful in separating racial identifications inscribed from without and those constructed from within a racialized group. "Formal-race" refers to the external, supposedly neutral, formal characteristics ascribed to certain racial groups by societal discourse, while "historical race" refers to the combination of societal inscription and communal identification that has "created" the race as currently constituted (Gotanda 257). Gotanda's use of several different terms to replace the singular term of "race," helps problematize the essentialist and monolithic understanding of race still prevalent in contemporary society.

³⁴ Actually in a more radically postmodern view of identity, they were never born "Black", except in the sense that identity can only be formulated in discourse and a discourse that denied the positivist "one drop of blood" rule common to the United States did not popularly exist.

³⁵ This idea of historical events fitting into a previously established dramatic "plot," here one of innocence and redemption is akin to the poststructural historiography of Hayden White who notes how historical discourse partakes of "emplotment" (as discussed above) which mediates, obscures, or obliterates historical access to the real (or to "meaning") through discursive mediation.

³⁶ The primary reason for Spiegelman's deployment of the comic-book form is undoubtedly (and self-admittedly) because this was the form in which he had always worked. It is, however, also an extremely appropriate one in the sense that Jews were often portrayed as mice, rats, and vermin in cartoon form in Nazi Julius Streich's weekly *Der Sturmer*. The other commonly cited source for Spiegelman's choice of mice for Jewish representation is the equally anti-Semitic *Der ewige Jude* (1940) by Fritz Hippler in which Hippler cross-cuts between ghetto rabbis and sewer rats (Doherty 74-75). In *Maus*, by contrast, Joshua Brown argues that "...the Jews are *not* mice, the Poles are *not* pigs, the Germans are *not* cats. The anthropomorphic presentation of the characters should make that eminently clear" (105; emphasis in original). Brown may overstate the case somewhat, but it is clear that Spiegelman's appropriation of Nazi iconography is meant ironically not literally. We must also note that Spiegelman partakes of stereotypical depictions of the gentile characters as well, with French frogs, and Gypsy "moths." While this appears to be an effort to expose and concretize discursive constructions of racial identity, it only makes this an obvious and political issue in the case of the Jews.

³⁷ Although I initially found this passage in LaCapra's study, it appears quite frequently in studies of *Maus* (although not always at such length). The complete quote also appears in James Young's "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past" and originally in Spiegelman's letter, *New York Times Book Review* 29 Dec. 1991: 4.

³⁸ Dominick Lacapra's study of *Maus* in *History and Memory After Auschwitz* analyzes its hybridity in depth (143-155).

³⁹ For a fascinating analysis of the deployment of linguistic difference in *Maus*, see Rosen “The Language of Survival.” Rosen points to the degree to which Vladek’s voice and language, “uniquely broken, incompetent, unmastered” (260) is the closest the book gets to “authoritative” (260).

⁴⁰ My reading here is diametrically opposed to several other critics’ accounts of *Maus*. Steven Tabachnick, for one, sees the photographs as lending authenticity, rather than pointing to construction. “These genuine photographs say that this story, like the Holocaust itself, actually happened; that this is autobiography, not fiction,” while simultaneously declaring that it lends an air of nostalgia (160). Nostalgia, of course, consists of a coloring of the past that could hardly be said to be strictly “accurate,” and the point here is not, I believe, a separation of autobiography and fiction but an observation of what they share. This is not to say that Spiegelman does not aim for an accurate presentation of the past (he does), but that he simultaneously argues for the impossibility of actually achieving such a representation. For much more on photographs and their contribution to memory (and post-memory) in *Maus*, see Hirsch “Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory.”

⁴¹ “But Anja-her appearance-you could see more easy she was Jewish. I was afraid for her” (*Maus* 136).

⁴² Again, Hayden White’s suggestion that there are only so many “stories” that events can be plotted into seems relevant here. In denying Vladek the narrative of “messianic redemption,” Artie finds himself faced with the narrative of Jewish miserliness, which is of course intimately connected with the narrative of anti-Semitism that contributed to the Holocaust in the first place. The desire to avoid emplotment does not seem like an easily attainable goal here.

⁴³ For an account of this discourse, see Gilman *The Jew’s Body*, 99-101, 234-43. e. g. “For Jews bear the salient stigma of the black skin of the syphilitic...”; “The Jews are black, according to nineteenth-century racial science, because they are not a pure race, because they are a race which has come from Africa” (99).

⁴⁴ If, for de Certeau, classical history is characterized by its tendency to construct “others” of the past, we can see how collective memory is equally prone to constructing “others,” only here in the more politically volatile present.

⁴⁵ This is the side of the border we might associate with Baudrillard who writes, “All Western faith and good faith became engaged in [a] wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange— God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum— not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (5-6).

⁴⁶ My focus here on the possibility of accessing the past for the purposes of political radicalism presumes that the version of history most often presented in place of an accurate one is one that serves reactionary and conservative interests. While I do not think this is too far too stretch credulity, the very notion that an at least partially truthful account of the past can be known assumes that access to it may be (and probably has been) used for alternate and various purposes.

⁴⁷ The common suggestion is that those who have faith in the capacity of historical representation to accurately present the past are naively accepting of modes of representation that are far from being transparently mimetic but are instead serving the needs of hegemony. This naive acceptance of traditional form is that which is savagely attacked by Foucault and before him, Nietzsche, both of whom call for a dismantling of the traditional practice of history precisely because of its congeniality to hegemony. This argument assumes a naive trust in traditional accounts of history presented traditionally. My claim is that a skepticism towards these traditional accounts without the abandonment of the possibility of any referentiality has the potential for a greater radicalism, an attack on power based on historical accuracy, and therefore some degree of truth.

⁴⁸ Much of the origins of the first wave of American historical relativism go back to readings (and particularly misreadings) of scientific theories such as Einstein's Theory of Relativity, Bohr's principle of "complementarity" and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, along with the philosophy of pragmatism (William James, John Dewey, C. S. Peirce, et. al) (Novick *Noble Dream* 133-167) combined with the close linking of history with science and social science. The champions of this early relativism, Charles Beard and Carl Becker, are rarely referred to today despite their prominence at the time. The reaction against relativism was largely constructed from a perceived schism between American and Allied empirical and ideologically neutral science and the state-sponsored and controlled Nazi and Socialist sciences that were purportedly so ideologically biased as to lose their claim to accuracy. The later resurgence of challenges to objectivity were less influenced by these movements in the sciences but were linked rather more closely to the widespread "linguistic turn" in the humanities which attempted to position science within language itself and within discourse theory in general. Lyotard's effort to mark the moment of postmodernism as the moment of realization that science cannot function as a metanarrative and that it too, surprisingly enough, is a "language game," is emblematic of this shift. Americans were not, of course, the first or only group of historians to question the possibility of objectivity. The French were equally, if not more, concerned with analyzing such problems. The debate on this side of the Atlantic is a reasonable reflection of debates elsewhere for my purposes, however, and a complete recap of all positions on the debate worldwide would be outside of my purview here. Suffice it to say that objectivity has proved to be a difficult and hotly debated topic since the practice of history began to be theorized as a whole. My concerns are more focused on the narrativist positions advocated by Hayden White and his fellow travelers over the past quarter century and their common association with postmodern fiction, which I largely deny.

⁴⁹ This is my effort to boil down over a hundred years of institutional history and is therefore reductive to say the very least. Nevertheless, the broader point remains

applicable. The battle over the possibility of objectivity in historical discourse is a lengthy one, although the central place of narrative theory within that discourse is considerably less lengthy. Certainly, Sir Philip Sidney was concerned with the distinction between fiction and history as far back as the 16th century (612), but the idea that narrative itself has some bearing on the possibility of material referentiality is significantly more recent.

⁵⁰ Although White is most frequently identified as the father of narrativist relativism, Louis Mink notes some early important discussions of historical narrativism that predate White's breakthrough in *Metahistory*. These include Morton White's *The Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, A. R. Louch's "History as Narrative," Maurice Mandelbaum's "A Note on History as Narrative," and W. B. Gallie's *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (see Mink 45, n3). In addition to these discussions of narrativism, relativism within the past quarter century has taken several different forms, complete coverage of which exceeds the goals of this introduction and this study. Again, Novick's *That Noble Dream* is a useful reference for the institutional history involved, particularly the long final section on "Objectivity in Crisis." While Novick notes the diffuse nature of the recent philosophical opposition to historical objectivity, he also acknowledges the central position White has taken within the debate, both as a figure of admiration (by the likes of Mink and Ankersmit) and of distaste by those who "required a symbolic embodiment of extreme 'nihilist relativism'" (598-99).

⁵¹ I will discuss the capacity for conclusions to dictate meaning more substantially in Chapters One and Two, in reference to *Between the Acts* and *Waterland*.

⁵² White's own amendments, changes, and deviations from this basic account of his ideas (derived principally from his "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality") are many and the further contributions of followers and opponents are legion and would be impossible to recount here fully, nor is it necessary to do so. It is worthwhile to mention, however, that his earlier, and more frequently cited, introduction to *Metahistory*, entitled "The Poetics of History" emphasizes more thoroughly how narrative has the capacity to dictate morality and worldview by molding the events that are its raw material into particular story structures or "modes of emplotment." His borrowing of these basic structures from Northrop Frye's work of literary criticism, *Anatomy of Criticism*, only furthers the sense that White sees history and fiction as much more closely aligned than history and science. The modes of emplotment he identifies, Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire, each serve to "explain" the events of the past in different ways, imposing a different ideology particularly when combined with modes of argument that establish the nature of causality within any particular historical discourse. White's further linking of particular types of tropes, or figures of speech, to the modes of argument he identifies inextricably links notions of causality and explanation to notions of semiotic slippage, imprecise meaning, and the impossibility of full explanation. When pride of place is given to "irony" as the final tropological model, the one based on "aporia" or doubt, "in which the author signals in advance a real or feigned disbelief in the truth of his own statements..." (*Metahistory* 37), it is clear that historical referentiality is identified as a discursive formation rather than an actual possibility.

⁵³ Support for White's general viewpoint is provided by the likes of Hans Kellner, Frank Ankersmit, Louis Mink, Dominick LaCapra and French historiography linked to French poststructuralism like that of Michel de Certeau. Certeau's simple statement that "in pretending to recount the real, [history] manufactures it" ("History: Science and Fiction" 43) sums up White's suggestion that reality is a discursive formation, and likewise his account of "the bewitching voices of the narration [that] transform, reorient, and regulate the space of social relations" ("History" 43) more economically restates White's claim that narrative serves a regulatory function. This seeming obliteration of reference to the material past is denounced from both right and left by such traditional historians as Gertrude Himmelfarb (who refers to the move towards a postmodernist history as a "flight from fact") and Geoffrey Elton (who demands a "return to essentials") as well as radical historians like Bryan Palmer who see postmodernist historiography as a threat to a Marxism that relies on cultural materialism and the "real" plight of "real" workers. Christopher Lorenz has also proven to be a consistent and persistent voice against narrativism, while Dominick LaCapra, often identified with the narrativists, holds some important reservations. There are, of course, volumes written within and about this debate, the intricacies and scope of which I cannot begin to cover here. For excellent overviews of the topic, as well as a selection of important essays, see Fay, Pomper, and Vann *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, Ankersmit and Kellner *A New Philosophy of History*, Jenkins, *The Postmodern History Reader*, Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, and Canary and Kozicki, *The Writing of History*. A fairly substantial and well-organized bibliography is usefully supplied in the Jenkins text.

⁵⁴ It would be quite a stretch to call these techniques "experimental" in fiction at this late stage, (at least) a century after these techniques began to be employed with increasing regularity, but again White speaks principally of historical narration where such techniques have been infrequently employed.

⁵⁵ Again, there is much similarity here between the case made for the historical sublime and that made by Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and elsewhere. Spivak, too, argues for the essential inaccessibility of many voices of the past and warns against the appropriation and representation of them because of the dangers of ideological misuse. Like Kellner, Spivak suggests listening to the "silences" of the past and expressing their inexpressibility through a rejection of traditional form and the easy accessibility of realistic narrative. Her allegiance to Derrida's version of poststructuralism and the inescapable aporias of epistemology is well known.

Chapter One
The Pageantry of the Past and the Reflection of the Present: History, Reality, and
Feminism in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*.

Virginia Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), occupies an intriguing place in the historical novels of the twentieth century. Written by one of the now most canonical modernists, it has, along with *The Waves*, been identified more recently as a forerunner of postmodernism, or at least more postmodern attitudes towards history. Indeed, the entire novel is saturated with speculation upon and theorization of the nature of history. Weiner Deiman notes that the novel has "an almost obsessive preoccupation with history on virtually every page" (56).¹ However, as in most of Woolf's work, locating one position that the novel takes on the conceptualization of history would be extremely difficult, as Woolf is a master of ambiguity, playing each character and their perspectives off of one another. Certainly Lucy Swithin's evolutionary and millennia-spanning vision of prehistoric London contrasts with the satirical overview of English literary history seen in Miss La Trobe's pageant. Likewise, the contemporary threat of Nazism is a dominant influence on someone like Giles Oliver, while other characters seem if not oblivious to this threat then somewhat less obsessed by it. One thing that is clear, however, from the multiplicity of viewpoints the novel provides on the nature of history and historical narrative, is that Woolf does not invite her readers to take historical

narrative as read, accepting uncritically what traditionally organized and presented historical narratives provide without a closer interrogation. Indeed, more difficult questions may be whether or not Woolf provides us with any sense of how history should be represented, whether past reality can indeed be accessed at all, or if the multiplicity of viewpoints and contingent representations suggest that no true representation of reality is possible, or even desirable.

Over the course of this chapter I show how this novel, along with the contemporary essay *Three Guineas*,² foresees the problematic of historical representation I have outlined in the introduction. *Between the Acts*, like Spiegelman's *Maus* and Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, insistently muddies the distinctions between fact and fiction, art and history, memory, history, and narrative, in order to question, problematize, and largely deconstruct what had been established within public discourse as the most proper and accurate mode of historical representation. In doing so, however, it does not, as some have suggested, abandon the possibility of accurate historical representation, nor does it champion "undecidability" as an ethics in itself. Rather, *Between the Acts* insists on a material referentiality as the basis for a radical ethics while offering us a new kind of historical representation. Long before Hayden White's critique of narrative's capacity to reproduce the past and its tendency to obscure

its own limits, Woolf's novel refuses narrative as a ideal mode of historical representation. It rather insists on models of both non-narratability and anti-narrativity, using the "present" moment as its primary building-block and focusing on moments "between the acts" as opposed to the climactic actions that generate narrative. Each of these strategies contributes to Woolf's feminist vision of a world, and an aesthetic no longer dictated by patriarchal forms and a possibility for a third "plot," one neither of love nor hate. but one of "peace."

The Picture and the Portrait

The novel takes place in one day in 1939, the day of the annual village pageant on the grounds of Pointz Hall, the residence of the Olivers. The pageant is to be a historical one presenting, "Scenes from English History" (61), but well before the reader knows the subject of the pageant, the theme of history itself is introduced. Lucy Swithin, the sister of the Hall's patriarch, Bartholomew Oliver, is reading an *Outline of History* (modeled after either H. G. Wells's or G. M. Trevelyan's comprehensive history of England),³ which describes the antediluvian prehistoric London, when England was not yet separated from the continent, when Piccadilly was filled with rhododendrons, and when it was populated by "monsters" like "the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the

mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, [...] we descend” (10). Mrs. Swithin’s long view of history, of which human history itself is only a small segment, is complemented by more traditional accounts of national history in the pageant and even family history.

Family history is emphasized in the two portraits at the top of the stairs in the Hall. “Two pictures hung opposite the window. In real life they had never met, the long lady and the man holding his horse by the rein. The lady was a picture, bought by Oliver because he liked the picture; the man was an ancestor. He had a name. He held the rein in his hand” (29). Here the lady is shown to be “merely” a picture, while the ancestor bears the weight of “reality,” of history itself. This juxtaposition of the two portraits initially seems to offer the reader what has, at times, been considered a typically modernist distinction between “art” as an independent and autonomous project and reality as something distinguished from art and outside of it. The lady, in this sense, is a floating signifier with no referent, while the ancestor’s portrait signifies something beyond itself: the external world, or reality.

In this context, it is useful to advert to one of the central touchstones for the definition of modernism itself, T. S. Eliot’s well-known essay, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth.” Here, in referring to the mythological parallels deployed in James Joyce’s

masterpiece, Eliot writes, “It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot 681). Eliot praises Joyce for providing a bastion of art that serves to protect us from the chaos and futility of what he calls “contemporary history,” or what we might provisionally call reality itself. Eliot’s assertion, when read alongside Frankfurt-school influenced analyses of the importance and impact of “autonomous art” provides one common definition of modernism. Theodor Adorno, in an essay called “Commitment” among other places, calls for an art that critiques the corruption of the world by refusing to participate in it. While overtly political art is easily fetishized and co-opted by the capitalist system, Adorno argues that alien, difficult, horrific, and sublime works like those of Beckett and Kafka succeed where politically committed art fails, by not participating in the discourse of politics that has created oppression in the first place. “Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand” (315). Adorno’s favoring of autonomous works of art echoes Eliot’s appreciation for those works which lie outside of, or function as protection from, the corrupt world in

which they are produced. Despite Adorno and Eliot's own tremendous social and political differences, together they provide us with the now somewhat conventional assessment of what modernism is, that which produces complete and autonomous works of art that lie outside of the "world" itself and which both critique that world and shelter us from it.⁴ This juxtaposition of art and world is evident in the two paintings at the top of the stairs in Pointz Hall.

No sooner, however, than this separation of art and life is introduced in the novel, than it is exploded, questioned and problematized. Although the ancestor has all the weight of reality and history initially attached to him, the reader soon learns that this portrait excludes, omits, and deletes elements of reality in an effort to contain and configure the past. While Buster the horse is included in the portrait, Colin, the "famous hound" whom the ancestor wished to include in the picture and is buried at his feet in the same grave is omitted because the "Reverend Whatshisname" would not allow his inclusion at the sitting. Immediately, this exclusion of the dog puts the empirical, mimetic claim of the historical portrait into question, as it excludes as much as it includes, while calling to mind Woolf's *Flush*, the biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning told from the perspective of her dog. Later, however, it also becomes clear that Colin has not been lost to history at all, but has been amply recorded. Bartholomew

Oliver asserts, “There was my ancestor. He had a dog. The dog was famous. The dog has a place in history. He left it on record that he wished his dog to be buried with him,” while his sister reads this historical data into the picture itself, “‘I always feel,’ Lucy broke the silence, ‘he’s saying: ‘Paint my dog’”” (38).

In this rather lighthearted discussion of the family history of Colin is an important commentary on the nature of historical representation that is then carried out throughout the novel and particularly in Miss La Trobe’s pageant. The exclusion of Colin indicates the propensity, and indeed inevitability, of historical representation to exclude, omit, erase, and select important elements of history, reflecting the contemporary rise of relativist historiography and predicting its later revival.⁵ Likewise, however, because the ancestor chose to record Colin’s existence elsewhere, his absence from the portrait becomes the central fact of the ancestor’s historical existence, leading Lucy to identify the ancestor purely by his desire to be buried with his dog and to be painted with him. In fact, while the dog’s name is remembered and emphasized in these passages, the ancestor himself recedes, is left unnamed, and his identity itself is left overdetermined by the absence of his dog. In this microcosm, we see how the transmission of history distorts and omits essential elements of the historical record while providing us with only partial stories. In one historical representation the important element of the dog is excluded,

while in the others left behind his significance is, if anything, overemphasized, obscuring the identity and history of his master.

In his discussion of the novel, Allen McLaurin juxtaposes the two paintings to focus on Woolf's aestheticism and formalism, allying her with the definition of modernism sketched out above. He asserts that Woolf approves of the independent art work of the "picture" because of its "pure form" while disapproving of the contamination of the portrait of the ancestor by social and worldly concerns. McLaurin allies Woolf's aestheticism here with the formalism of fellow Bloomsbury-ite Roger Fry who insisted that "the essential aesthetic quality [of the work of art] has to do with pure form" and that "the value of the aesthetic emotion" is "infinitely removed from [...] ethical values and likewise from the concerns of history and politics" (54). More recently, David McWhirter largely refutes these claims by briefly focusing on the two paintings as part of his argument that *Between the Acts* may perhaps be the "first postmodern historical novel" (805-8) in its exposé of history itself as textually, discursively and ideologically produced. In his refutation of the modernist interpretation of the two pictures as fundamentally opposed, McWhirter notes that the portrait of the ancestor is, like the picture of the lady, posed, composed and constructed as a work of art for aesthetic value and is constructed primarily from ideological discourse rather than from a mimetic

fidelity to the historical real. In this, McWhirter notes how our sense of the real and our historical representations have much in common with works of art in the sense that they are staged, constructed and manipulated for particular purposes, not merely a mirror held up to reality.

McWhirter does note, however, that there are still substantial differences between the portrait of the ancestor and the picture of the lady. The lady in the picture, for example, has more in common with Colin, the missing dog, than she does with the ancestor himself. As McWhirter points out:

the lady is anonymous, without name, identity, or voice, she makes no demands and produces no talk. Imaged as a vase, ‘alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still distilled essence of emptiness, silence,’ the lady’s formal perfection—the objectification of her beauty in the male artist’s ‘picture’—is inseparable from her gendered powerlessness, her absence from history and its discourses. (806)

So, while the “historical” portrait of the ancestor is brought closer to an art work in that it is revealed to be posed, mediated and constructed, the supposedly pure form of the lady’s picture is likewise revealed not as outside the struggles, oppressions and power relations of historical existence, but rather as a reflection of and production of those power relations. When paired with the portrait, we can see in the picture how men’s stories and patriarchal pursuits (in this case, hunting) are considered worthy of historical consideration, while women are seen as mere objects of the male gaze, worthwhile only

to the degree to which they give aesthetic pleasure.⁶ Here the division between formal purity and historical context is dissolved even where it seems most forcefully asserted.

While the initial thrust of the modernist movement has often been critically seen as championing a pure form that abandons the real world pursuit of the ethical, political, and historical in pursuit of a more perfect aestheticism, as the specter of Nazism loomed, a new generation of artists and critics, mostly on the left, insisted that such an approach to art no longer met the needs of the world in which it was produced. Instead, a demand for artists to “take sides” politically and ethically in the instance of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent conflagration of World War II was intense. Woolf certainly felt the pressure of these demands despite her continuing distaste for overtly polemical fiction (an aversion that did not apply to her essays).⁷ It is true that in response to these demands, Woolf at times seems to suggest that art and politics as such should be separated. When, however, Woolf writes in a letter to her nephew Julian that “all politics be damned” (qtd. in H. Lee 671), we cannot take this to be a statement of a detached modernist aestheticism that insists, once and for all, on the separation of art from life, politics and ethics. Indeed, as we have already seen through the example of the portraits, such a rigid binary division is shown to be impossible within her work.

While Eliot positions *Ulysses* as that which is protected from the chaos and disorder of history by the unity and form of art, in *Between the Acts*, Woolf presents the telling of history itself as an artistic creation. More so than the family history of the portraits, La Trobe's pageant dominates the novel, foregrounding how one artist "creates" history, recording, selecting, erasing, and editing vast expanses of English history in order to construct a unified artwork. In this, the novel presages poststructural and postmodern theorization of the discursive and textual construction of reality in general and of history in particular. *Between the Acts* clearly suggests how history itself is not a mimetic reflection of an inviolable real, but is rather a creation of retrospective and concurrent signification, a point of view less congenial to conventional definitions of modernism and more in line with the critical delineation of postmodernism itself. As Linda Hutcheon offers, "What this means is that the familiar humanist separation of art and life (or human imagination and order versus chaos and disorder) no longer holds" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 7). Miss La Trobe's historical pageant in *Between the Acts* clearly offers us this postmodern view in the sense that it presents history (or more properly, historical representation) as an artistic construction. In addition, while it promises to initially present "Scenes from English history" (61), it later confuses and/or conflates English history with the history of English literature, at times presenting history proper

but more often presenting pastiches of various historical literary styles like the Renaissance drama and Restoration comedy. Here Woolf's novel, as in the comparison of the two paintings, pushes resolutely against the boundary distinctions between art and life, between fact and fiction, allying her novel in the eyes of many critics, with a postmodernism that may be accused of historical relativism and therefore an ethical relativism, where ethics is derived from a reading of history.⁸

Although the overlapping of history and literature in the pageant partially deconstructs the "humanist" separation of art and life, the novel does this more aggressively in other ways, making the reader see the fragility of this separation. The most clearly postmodern moment in this regard occurs after the pageant has ended and Miss La Trobe retires to the local pub to contemplate her next artistic creation. "She no longer saw them, yet they upheld her, sitting arms akimbo with her glass before her. There was the high ground at midnight; there the rock and two scarcely perceptible figures. Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She set down her glass. She heard the first words" (147).

At first, this passage merely seems to be a description of artistic inspiration, where Miss La Trobe "hears" how her next pageant will begin. Later, however, it takes on a more complex valence. At the end of the novel, Giles and Isa Oliver, two of the

characters who live at Pointz Hall and who help comprise the audience of the pageant, prepare to confront one another after a day in which Giles has engaged in adulterous flirtation with Mrs. Manresa, while Isa has made her anger at Giles clear.

Left alone together for the first time that day, they were silent. Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought; they would embrace. From that embrace another life must be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fights the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night.

Isa let her sewing drop. The great hooded chairs had become enormous. And Giles too. And Isa too against the window. The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among the rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke. (152)

This closing passage does more than close the chapter on the contentious relationship between the Olivers for the day; it puts their very status as independent agents into question. The reference to the “high place” reflects the “high ground” that Miss La Trobe envisions, while the “two figures” in La Trobe’s vision are certainly the Giles and Isa presented here. When the final sentence encloses the Olivers on a stage, where the curtain rises, we are presented with the possibility that Giles and Isa are part of a play, rather than merely its observers, that they are artistic creations as opposed to “real” agents, once again seemingly undercutting the possibility of human agency on their part and therefore a refusal of their status as ethically autonomous subjects.

Although there are multiple ways in which *Between the Acts* breaks down the Eliotic modernist division between art and life, these final lines of the novel cement the deconstruction of this division as one of the novel's central themes. Just as the two paintings at Pointz Hall at first seem diametrically opposed with one representing art and the other reality, the actions that take place within the pageant initially seem to be art, while those focused on between its acts seem to be representative of life itself. Nevertheless, this division is destroyed again, when a theatrical curtain rises on Giles and Isa, two of the members of the audience, not, we are led to believe until this moment, actors in the play. This inversion of the framing story and the frame story suggest that this division cannot be a stable one and that no clear division between art and life can be maintained.⁹

The Woolfian Artist and the Relativist Historian

While Woolf and her modernist contemporaries were often criticized by succeeding generations for an aestheticism that inviolably separated art from politics and the social sphere, the recent effort by contemporary critics, including McWhirter, Pamela Caughie, and Patricia Klineinst Joplin, to claim Woolf for postmodernism is partially made in an effort to exempt Woolf from these charges. A huge body of materialist

feminist criticism that re-reads Woolf's fiction through the prism of her own feminist essays¹⁰ also effectively divorces Woolf from these accusations. Certainly, in *Between the Acts*, as well as in works like *Flush* and *Orlando*, Woolf self-consciously breaks down the barriers between fiction and the more explicitly mimetic "realistic" modes of representation like history and biography, as opposed to erecting them. In this, it would seem clear that art both participates in and constructs history itself and cannot be excluded from any debate over politics and/or social ethics.

Still, however, where modernism was once criticized for its attempts to divorce politics and ethics from art, the postmodern too has come under fire for a radical relativism that may disqualify itself from the construction of a coherent ethics or a participation in proactive politics. While the radically constructivist accounts of historiography discussed in the introduction of this study, along with the debates over their ethical repercussions, post-date Woolf's death by several decades, *Between the Acts* explores the problems and concerns about ethics and historical representation in ways that predict and confront these debates, as well as shed light upon them. Woolf's own theorization of fiction is marked by similar concerns to those raised by Hayden White, while her novel deals with the elusive nature of reality and the ethical and political necessity of accessing it.

While Eliot praises *Ulysses* for its division of art from life, in “Modern Fiction” Woolf also praises Joyce’s novel, but for different reasons. At first, Woolf seems in agreement with Eliot in her critique of materialists like Wells who discharge the work best left to “government officials” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 105), the work of politics and social intervention. Woolf here seems to advocate an autonomous art separate from the concerns of politics and “real life.” Yet, somewhat paradoxically, Woolf does not praise Joyce for his unity of form, but rather for his disregard of the demands of form in his pursuit of reality itself:

he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, and in order to preserve it he disregards [...] whatever seems to him adventitious, whether it be probability, or coherence, or any other of those signposts which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader [...]. If we want life itself, here surely we have it” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 107).

In fact, in both “Phases of Fiction” and “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf identifies the central problem of artistic creation as the difficulty in maintaining unity, order and coherence while simultaneously representing the real world accurately and truthfully. “It is the gift of style, arrangement, construction, to put us at a distance from the special life and to obliterate its features; while it is the gift of the novel to bring us into close touch with life. The two powers fight if they are brought into combination” (“Phases” 101). Here, Woolf notes that unity and order are not to be found in real life

and since it has traditionally been the novel's duty to represent life in all of its complexity, the traditional provinces of art (unity and beauty) are in natural opposition to the novel form and, indeed, to reality itself. The difficulty of trying to maintain order, unity and coherence in a real world antithetical to these concepts is illustrated in *Mrs. Dalloway*, wherein Clarissa desperately tries to maintain these qualities in the form of her party. However, when Clarissa hears of Smith's suicide, she internally notes, "Oh! [...] in the middle of my party, here's death" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 183). The unity and order of the party is shattered by the intrusion of the slice of chaos and despair of Septimus's world, the real world.

Between the Acts is likewise characterized by the tension between the unity of artistic achievement and the chaos or dispersal of reality. Lucy Swithin is prone to "one-making," the attempt to draw everything in her surroundings into one central order and meaning, while Miss La Trobe attempts to do the same with her pageant. The tension between the possibility of unity and the inevitable reality of dispersal are also echoed by the alternatively unifying and dissolving sounds of La Trobe's gramophone. When there is an unexpected gap in the unified whole of her artistic creation, La Trobe bemoans its loss in a similar fashion to Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "Illusion had failed. 'This is death,' she murmured, 'death'" (99). For La Trobe, the absence of artistic shaping, of

illusion itself, is tied to a vertiginous loss of meaning, a confrontation with the real that is analogized with death itself and which contrasts the unifying vision of her pageant.¹¹

Similarly to Woolf's analysis of the disjunction between reality and art, Hayden White and other relativist historians see the unity, coherence, and emplotment of historical narrative as incompatible with the chaos and uncertainty of reality. From this perspective, Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts* can quite easily be seen as both a historian in the mode White suggests, and the "artist" in Woolf's theory of fiction. In fact, for constructivist historiographers like White, there is little or no difference between an artistic creation and traditional historical discourse, as both take raw material and shape it into the form of a narrative or art through exclusions, erasures and selections, falsifying and fictionalizing that which has any purchase on empirical reality. Miss La Trobe then creates both a work of art and a historical text in her pageant and like both the Woolfian artist and White's historian she desperately attempts to create order and unity out of contradictory and chaotic raw material. It is this attempt at ordering that leads the historian or the artist further and further away from representing reality, because it is ordering and construction that are presented for their beauty as opposed to their mimetic fidelity. The question posed by the juxtaposition of the two paintings and by the final encounter between the Olivers is, however, whether or not the real can be accessed at all,

outside of the shaping of artist or historian and if this is not possible, is an ethics or justice based upon a reference to the truth of the past, in the sense offered by Norman Geras in the introduction, possible? Although Woolf's novel shows the complicated and pervasive influence of textual and discursive signification on historical representation, it is also clear that she insists on the possibility of access to a material reality that cannot be completely contained or mediated by discourse and which offers us the possibility for establishing an ethics based on materiality.

The Pageant, Patriarchy, and Deconstruction

Woolf's insistence on access to the materiality of history is not a claim for naïve and transparent referentiality. Rather, it is based on a rigorous and complex analysis of the discursivity of traditional historical representation and, particularly, a critique of its patriarchal, imperialist, and hegemonic iteration. The analysis of the two pictures provides a microcosm of the novel as a whole in this regard, but is far from telling the whole story. Woolf's discursive analysis of patriarchy in *Three Guineas* provides an early example of such work and is a harbinger of much essential feminist critique that has followed. Nevertheless, Woolf does not settle for a deconstruction and revelation of how

discourses deform and control historical representation, she also insists on the possibility of a more accurate presentation of the real and the necessity for finding it.

Like Woolf herself, Miss La Trobe may be seen as a modernist in her attempts to impose unity and order on her work of art, but she can also be seen as postmodern in her efforts to expose history as mediated and constructed. Like much later feminist criticism influenced by, and influencing, poststructural and postmodern theory, *Between the Acts*, in concert with its nonfiction partner *Three Guineas*, exposes how society, and history in particular, are not merely representations of past reality, but are also a discursive production of a patriarchal society which defines what is important enough to be considered “history.” Miss La Trobe’s pageant both re-presents and parodically deconstructs traditional patriarchal histories, exposing how what had been naturalized as the subject matter and formal presentation of historical narrative are actually discursive productions of patriarchal ideology, making historical discourse itself complicit in the oppression of women. As Woolf points out in *Three Guineas*, it is a masculinist paradigm that defines the great “acts” of great men, particularly in the field of battle, as the central subject matter for historical narrative. In this case, it is impossible to prevent war when battlefield exploits are given the privilege of place as the central element to be

immortalized in historical narrative. She argues, indeed, that the only way to eliminate war is to eliminate it in the mind, “we should not believe in war” (*Three Guineas* 97).

This critique of patriarchal discourse and its domination of historical narrative is seen clearly in *Between the Acts*, wherein traditional historical subject matter is either absent or parodically reproduced and deflated. Where history, and traditional narrative itself, are dependent on climactic “acts,” usually of violence or conflict, Woolf’s novel suggests that it is more important to look “between the acts,” to find not only our past and present, but also reality itself. While Miss La Trobe’s excision of 200 years of English history emphasizes the necessary selections and erasures that inhibit the ability of any history to accurately reproduce reality, *Between the Acts* also submits the possibility of finding the real not in traditional historical narrative but in an alternative absence of narration.¹² One audience member, Colonel Mayhew, complains, for instance, of the notable omission of all military history. ““Why leave out the British Army? What’s history without the Army, eh?”” (110). La Trobe (and Woolf) point here to how history has been inextricably linked to acts of violence, domination, warfare, and bloodshed. La Trobe’s omission of this element of historical discourse offers the possibility that there are other stories to be told, or, more precisely, that an absence of “stories” such as these is preferable.

Likewise, when La Trobe does present a historical member of the dominant patriarchal culture, he is parodically undermined and critiqued. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf explicitly draws a parallel between the underlying urge for violence, domination, and “other”-ing in patriarchy and in colonialism: “abroad the monster has come more openly to the surface. There is no mistaking him there. He has widened his scope. He is interfering now with your liberty; he is dictating how you shall live; he is making distinctions not merely between the sexes, but between the races” (102). The pageant’s iconic Victorian policeman reveals the subtext of much British colonial discourse, by voicing his desire to dominate and enforce his will on others, rather than voicing the more socially acceptable rationales for such domination. “*Over thought and religion; drink; dress; manners; marriage too, I wield my truncheon. Prosperity and respectability always go, as we know, ‘and in ‘and. The ruler of an empire must keep his eye on the cot; spy too in the kitchen; drawing- room; library; [...]. That’s the price of Empire; that’s the white man’s burden*” (114; emphasis in original). The policeman’s soliloquy serves to expose how imperialist and nationalist discourse covers up patriarchal society’s penchant for operating through violence, domination, and ideological control.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf calls for a new type of college that will not teach “the arts of dominating other people; not the arts of ruling, of killing, of acquiring land and

capital,” (34) just as she asserts that these are precisely the skills and ideals that are taught in contemporary education. Likewise, earlier in the pageant, when the figure of “Reason” introduces the Enlightenment skit, she mentions that *“In distant mines the savage sweats; and from the reluctant earth the painted pot is shaped. At my behest, the armed warrior lays his shield aside; the heathen leaves the Altar steaming with unholy sacrifice [...]. No longer fears the unwary wanderer the poisoned snake”* (88-89; emphasis in original). Here again, the ideology that champions Reason also requires the exclusion of, and assignment of savagery to, “other” cultures, and the labeling of “heathen” and “unholy” to alternative religions. While Bartholomew Oliver and the rest of the audience cheer the ascension of Reason (88), it is clear that La Trobe parodies this self-congratulatory presentation of history and highlights the fact that certain peoples and cultures are caricatured, contained and isolated in order for England to define itself historically.

What makes Woolf’s novel particularly insightful is the way that it portrays these patriarchal and imperialist discursive formations as existing both within traditionally textual media, like the pageant itself, and outside of them, dictating behavior in everyday life. In this Woolf predicts many of the insights of poststructuralism. Reading these insights back into Woolf’s novel also proves useful. As Foucault suggests throughout

much of his discursive analyses, there is nowhere outside the network of discourses that constitute power. Likewise, Derrida's famous proclamation that there is no "outside the text" (*Of Grammatology* 158)¹³ does not indicate merely that the search for an extratextual referent is impossible, but rather that reality itself is composed of discourses, signs and contexts. As Simon Critchley points out in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Derrida's deconstruction does not, as some readings have suggested, "wish to turn the world into some vast library; nor does it wish to cut off reference to some 'extra-textual realm' [...] the word "text" does not suspend reference 'to history, to the world, to reality, to being *and especially not to the other*' (Critchley 39; Derrida *Limited Inc.* 37; emphasis in original). Derrida's term, archi-writing (*archi-écriture*) or the "general text" (*le texte en général*) (*Of Grammatology* 26), refers to the "text" of the world itself, the network of discourses and signification that comprise our experience of that world.

What I call 'text' implies all the structures called 'real,' 'economic,' 'historical,' socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that 'there is nothing outside the text'. That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naïve enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent and all reality has the structure of a différential trace [...] and that one cannot refer to this 'real' except in an interpretative experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of différential referring. That's all. (Derrida, *Limited Inc.* 148)

Without exploring fully the idea of the différential trace, it is clear that Woolf's *Between the Acts* suggests that, indeed, the everyday world is an "archi-writing" that can be read or, perhaps, "deconstructed" like a conventional text, the novel itself or the pageant within it. La Trobe's pageant illustrates how patriarchal and imperialist discourse controls what is presented as history, as well as dictating the behavior of agents within history itself. The reader is signaled to not confine their reading of these discourses to the pageant itself, however, by the use of the framing devices mentioned above. When the "curtain rises" on Isa and Giles, the reader understands that the Olivers are trapped within the same discourses, the same archi-writing, as those in the pageant.

As Herbert Marder puts it, the sense that:

ordinary life is merely a charade—more elaborately staged than the village play, but not fundamentally different in kind—is woven into the collective consciousness throughout. The idea that all our words and acts are forms of quotation, that social behavior masks tribal ritual is developed in several different contexts, ranging from Giles and Isa's dissatisfaction with the parts that have been assigned them to Mrs. Swithin's humorous claim that she could have played Cleopatra. ("Alienation Effects" 425)

Although Marder does not explicitly note that the "charade" played out in "life" is, like the pageant, one determined by patriarchal discourse, his sense that Giles and Isa, along with the other audience members, play out "roles" assigned to them, allows us to see how both pageants are enclosed within a "general text" of signification and discourse.

Isa and Giles act out the same roles as their forbearers, with Giles as the violent dominator and Isa as the oppressed homemaker. Although they are not part of the pageant, they continue to act out the social scripts that ensure patriarchal and colonial domination. In this way, social discourse both obscures and mediates the reality of the past and dictates behavior in the present. They are, indeed, the new pageant, which will repeat the same forms, dialogues, and social scripts as the previous one unless something is done to change them. Likewise, as the Olivers are the audience of the pageant, the readers of *Between the Acts* are the audience for the Olivers' interactions, and like them we are not "outside of the text." We too live in their world of patriarchal and imperialist signs and discourses; the curtain, too, is around us if only we can see it.¹⁴

This is, of course, largely Woolf's point in *Three Guineas*, in which she refuses to take a stridently anti-Nazi or pro-British nationalist position as the war approaches because she sees the deep and pervasive parallels between Nazi discourse and ideology and those of the patriarchal nationalist structure in England itself.¹⁵ She warns against the viewing of Britain as outside the network of discourses that make Hitlerism what it is, but rather asks for her readers to see their own complicity in the creation of Nazi Germany. Likewise, even though, Woolf calls for women to form a "Society of

Outsiders,” to reject their complicity with patriarchal culture, she nevertheless sees their own participation in this culture.¹⁶

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf, through the medium of Mrs. Swithin, notes that the contemporary English are hardly different from their Victorian ancestors, as symbolized by the “truncheon” of the policeman, or their Nazi contemporaries in their valuation of social status, violence and domination. As Woolf offers in *Three Guineas*, “it seems as if there were no progress in the human race, but only repetition” (120). Towards this point in *Between the Acts*, Mrs. Swithin notes that the Victorians are just “you and me and William dressed differently” (122), emphasizing the continuity between the 1939 audience of the pageant and their Victorian ancestors.¹⁷ Isa also notes the burden that the past lays upon those in the present, “How am I burdened with what they drew from the earth; memories; possessions. This is the burden that the past laid on me, last little donkey in the long caravanserai crossing the desert. ‘Kneel down,’ said the past. ‘Fill your pannier from our tree. Rise up donkey. Go your way ‘til your heels blister and your hoofs crack’” (109). Here Isa points to the oppressive influence the past has on the present, and how, particularly, the oppressions of the past and particularly of women, are discursively carried on in the present, despite the evident external and legal changes in the treatment of women. Isa notes that “That was the burden [...] laid on me in the

cradle; [...] crooned by singing women; what we must remember; what we would forget' (109). As she observes, the imperative to "forget" the oppression and the discursive construction of women is strong, but the possibility of such forgetting is not as achievable as she would hope. As she observes, "we *must* remember," despite the simultaneous need for forgetting. That is, our attempts to forget are futile, if not misguided, because the past is always present through the network of patriarchal discourses. The echoes of the pageant that occur outside of it, in the world of Pointz Hall, solidify the sense that the past depicted in the pageant is inextricable from the present outside of it.

The parallels between the pageant and the world outside it are too plentiful to comprehensively enumerate, but reviewing a few can help to elaborate how the novel configures the social text of patriarchy and imperialism. The depiction of the patriarchal tendency to value violence and domination, particularly of colonized cultures, is seen clearly in the pageant, but it is also reflected in the general text of the world outside the pageant. While Colonel Mayhew bemoans the exclusion of the army from the pageant, Bartholomew Oliver (Giles's father) dreams of the days when his life had meaning, precisely when he was involved in the British colonial project and entrusted with the use of that most patriarchal and violent of symbols, the gun. He dreams, "himself, a young man helmeted; and a cascade falling. But no water; and the hills, like grey stuff pleated;

and in the sand a hoop of ribs; a bullock maggot-eaten in the sun; and in the shadow of the rock, savages; and in his hand a gun. The dream hand clenched; the real hand lay on the chair arm” (17). Although much of this reminiscence seems hardly positive (the images of “grey”, “maggot-eaten,” “shadows” and “savages”) what does remain in Bartholomew’s mind is his own youth and power, his dominance which has passed in his old age.

When Isa then “interrupts” his reverie, he mentally accuses her of “destroying youth and India” (17) just as the possibility of a world shaped equally by female or feminist discourse would destroy the world Bartholomew lives in and the prerogatives he enjoys. Although his youth and gun are physically gone, the discourses and ideology of patriarchy and imperialism remain of value to Bartholomew and his contemporaries. Similarly, as Christopher Ames observes, the children of the stodgy parents in the pageant’s Victorian skit merely reiterate their parents’ prejudices, rather than breaking free of them: “the satire lies precisely in the younger generation’s lack of rebellion. When the young couple flee together to become missionaries, they carry on the imperialist project associated with their parents’ generation” (“Modernist Canon Narratives” 397). The seeming inescapability of patriarchal and imperialist discourse

may be a source of humor here, but it is also an ominous commentary on the world outside the pageant.

Like the young Victorians, Giles follows in his father's footsteps, fulfilling the literal definition of patriarchy, and reflects also his forefathers who "no longer fear the poisoned snake," during the first intermission of the pageant. While Giles is both fearful and angry at the impending war in Europe he repeats and reflects the violence it symbolizes. When coming across a snake in the grass, choking with a toad in its mouth and unable to swallow, Giles observes that "it was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. So raising his foot, he stamped on them. The mass crushed and slithered [...]. But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the barn, with blood on his shoes (72-3). Like Europe itself, the snake and the toad are killing one another, but the only solution Giles can arrive at is "action," violence and bloodshed. Although, this relieves him, it solves nothing, only creating more death and leaving a stain on his shoes. Still, however, it is clear to what a great degree the audience members of the pageant partake of a patriarchal ideology that valorizes violence as heroism. Just as the pageant opens with a song about the "*valiant Rhoderick*," "*Armed and Valiant/Bold and blatant*," (59) so too is Giles seen as a "hero," because of the blood on his shoes by the "wild child" Mrs. Manresa (78).

While Mrs. Manresa is, at times, seen as a transgressive, radical, figure who does not abide by the formal rules for society, her repetition of the discourse of masculine heroism, proven by bloodshed and violence, indicates just how pervasive such ideology is and how discursively constructed social scripts are less easily eluded than codified rules. Even the homosexual William Dodge, who is viewed by Giles as a “toady; a lickspittle” (46) because of his failure to fulfill the societal role of “masculinity,” views Giles from this romantic angle, being attracted to his masculinity and “heroism,” repeating internally the phrases associated with Rhoderick in the pageant (80). While Woolf, in *Three Guineas*, attempts to strip war of its romantic discursive baggage, she also acknowledges in *Between the Acts* the difficulty of doing so. Even as she writes, “if we knew the truth about war, the glory of war would be scotched and crushed where it lies curled up in the rotten cabbage leaves of our prostituted fact purveyors” (*Three Guineas* 97), she observes how deeply ingrained the belief in the glory and heroism of war is.

Just as men’s discursive and ideologically defined roles are outlined and defined in the pageant and reflected in the world outside of it, so too are women’s. Even Isa, who, for the most part, sees through the facade of Giles as a heroic figure and castigates him internally for his adulterous transgressions and hypocrisy, cannot completely abandon the social tendency to celebrate what he symbolizes and turn him into a hero.

While Isa, both internally tells Giles, “‘I don’t admire you [...]. Silly little boy, with blood on his boots’” (81), she nevertheless retains a part of herself that insists on loving him because he is “‘The father of my children’[...] slipping into the cliché conveniently provided by fiction’” (14). Here, Isa’s ability to identify how her love of both Giles and of patriarchy is textually and discursively produced does not prevent its existence.¹⁸ For her, love is part of the archi-writing that both creates and is created by the textuality of such fictional clichés. Giles, then, is simultaneously just a “silly boy” with bloody boots and the “father,” with all of the iconic power and influence that term invokes. As David McWhirter observes, despite Isa’s ability to identify the clichés that dictate her behavior, “she cannot escape the restrictive identity—wife, mother ‘Sir Richard’s daughter’—she has internalized” (795). In fact, even her fantasies of freedom are tied to patriarchal discourse as she chooses a gentleman farmer (Mr. Haines) as her prospect for adulterous love (see McWhirter 795).

Although Mrs. Swithin, after observing part of the pageant, feels that she could have played Cleopatra, and despite Catherine Wiley’s claims that the pageant “bears a distinctly feminine face” (13), much, if not all, of the pageant, reiterates the conventional, stereotypical, roles of women, even as it critiques and mocks them. While men are parodically presented as “heroic,” valiant, violent and dominant, women are associated

with the home and defined by their need to marry and reproduce. The valuation of domesticity and femininity in the Victorian era is reiterated by Budge when he returns after the Victorian skit to say, “*For it’s ‘Ome ladies, ‘Ome gentlemen. Be it never so humble, there’s no place like ‘Ome*” (120; emphasis in original). Despite the audience’s correct feeling that La Trobe and the pageant present this “Angel of the House” ideology in order to mock and critique it, much of the audience still cannot, or does not wish to, relinquish the ideology itself. ““Oh but it was beautiful,’ Mrs. Lynn Jones protested. Home she meant; the lamplit room; the ruby curtains; and Papa reading aloud” (121).

Similarly, the lust for money to be obtained through marriage that is depicted in the mock-Restoration comedy “Where There’s a Will, There’s a Way” is reflected in Mrs. Manresa’s marriage to the wealthy Jew, Ralph, who never appears in the novel. In addition, the cross-dressing and gender-bending of the mock Renaissance comedy is wrestled into order and conventional heterosexual couplings at its conclusion, just as the lesbian Miss La Trobe and the gay William Dodge are mocked, criticized and marginalized by the larger community in the broader world of the novel. The enforced heteronormativity, economically determined heterosexual relationships, and feminized domesticity that are both presented and mocked in the pageant are all reflected in the contemporary audience of the pageant, illustrating once again how the real world both

produces and reflects the textual and is discursively and ideologically determined. It is for this reason that Isa sees her own life as “abortive,” (15) never realizing her potential, but instead following the roles others have written for her, as mother and wife, but not as an agent capable of making change.

Taking this view of the novel, and particularly of the pageant itself, it is clear how it reflects the critical act of Derridean deconstruction and, at least initially, repeats some of its problems. Because Derridean philosophy denies the possibility of an external vantage point to critique or analyze a particular text or, more importantly, a broader social context, all “deconstructive” readings are, by definition, within the text they critique and are, therefore, as Simon Critchley points out, a “double reading”:

what distinguishes deconstruction as a textual practice is *double reading*—that is to say a reading that interlaces two motifs or layers of meaning, most often by first repeating what Derrida calls ‘the dominant interpretation’ [(*Limited Inc.* 143)] of a text in the guise of a commentary and second, within and through this repetition, leaving the order of commentary and opening a text up to the blind spots or ellipses within the dominant interpretation. (Critchley 23; emphasis in original)

Here, Critchley notes the way deconstructive readings, particularly by Derrida, first voice or repeat the dominant interpretation of the text before outlining how the text is inconsistent or blind to its own metaphysics and therefore “deconstructs” itself.

Although *Between the Acts* does not strictly follow the supplementary logic of deconstruction, it does, in many ways, provide a “double reading” in the way Critchley

suggests. While it does present the traditional account of patriarchal history, through the voice of Mr. Budge's policeman, the "conversion of the heathens" by the young Victorians, the rise of the Enlightenment, etc., it also reveals and illustrates the contradictions within that history, the incompatibility of Enlightenment reason and colonial domination, the impossibility of correlating romantic love with heroic slaughter, etc. In doing so, it exposes the contradictions of historical discourse and contemporary political practice, but like deconstruction, does not seem to offer an alternative, because all it has to work with is the text itself. In doing so, its purpose seems to be to destabilize patriarchal discourse as deconstruction attempts to destabilize dominant interpretations. "the second moment of reading [...] is *the destabilization of the stability of the dominant interpretation* [...] opening its intended meaning [...] onto an alterity which goes against what the text wants to say or mean" (Critchley 26-7). Certainly, from a feminist point of view, it is valuable to see how patriarchal discourse, and practice, is internally contradictory, and cannot logically fulfill its own purported ideology. Still, this avoids the question of an alternative discourse or ideology, offering neither, as deconstruction offers not its own interpretation but an unraveling of a previous one.

The description of deconstruction Critchley offers is remarkably similar, in fact, to Linda Hutcheon's assessment of the form and function of "postmodern parody" which

she identifies as a “double process of installing and ironizing [...] signal[ling] how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (“Postmodern Parody” 225). In this, Hutcheon suggests that parody in the postmodern era derives from the presentation or re-presentation of historical representations with irony in order to comment on the status and function those representations have in the contemporary world. Certainly, Woolf’s pastiches of the Renaissance drama, the Restoration comedy, and the Victorian family picnic function in this way, repeating the basic form and message of these types of texts along with an ironic commentary on their relevance to contemporary society, particularly from a feminist viewpoint. In this way, as Hutcheon suggests, Woolf’s novel foregrounds the “politics of representation,” particularly the history of such representations, and is thus “a value problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony the politics) of representation” (225). Here, Hutcheon denies the Fredric Jameson claim that postmodernism disqualifies itself from ethical and political relevance because of its repetition and appropriation of historical forms without context or depth (what Jameson calls “pastiche”). Although Hutcheon sees this occurring in such postmodern media as the music video and the popular film, she asserts that historiographic metafiction or postmodern parody does not follow this trajectory, but rather repeats and

appropriates forms in order to comment on the power and influence of such forms and representations, and in doing so, deconstructing, denaturalizing, or de-essentializing representations once taken to be truths and revealing them merely as texts with ideological repercussions. That is, it takes the “unacknowledged assumptions of the ‘collective consciousness’”(0) and reveals them precisely *as* assumptions, discursively produced, rather than the truths they are assumed to be in the larger culture.

In the context of feminism, Hutcheon argues “Postmodern parodic strategies are often used by feminist artists to point to the history and historical power of those [patriarchal] cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing [them] in such a way as to deconstruct them” (230). Hutcheon’s argument for the political and ethical impact of postmodern parody of historical representations is, however, still ethically and politically limited in its tendency to stop at the point of denaturalization and critique, while refusing to offer a stronger alternative, or indeed to acknowledge that patriarchal history is not only politically damaging and exploitative, but also factually inaccurate, with a more accurate representation of the truth being possible.

While patriarchal history is revealed to be a construction of ideological hegemony in postmodern parody, the problematic nature of *all* representations is foregrounded as well in this type of fiction. Therefore, while we are taught to doubt the “truth” presented

to us by hegemonic power, we are also taught that truth in relationship to historical representation is impossible to access. “The postmodern condition with respect to history might well be described as one of the acceptance of radical uncertainty” (Hutcheon, “Postmodern Parody” 227). In describing one example, Hutcheon notes how Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* reduces all access to the purported real to the level of pure representation, open to manipulation and, in fact, lies, abandoning the possibility of access to material referentiality. It is this movement to displace the real completely into the purview of representation that is ultimately denied by Woolf’s novel. While *Between the Acts* does function in the fashion of a postmodern parody, revealing the discursive nature of patriarchal history and providing a social critique of contemporary patriarchy, it also anticipates the problems with stopping with this function and moves more firmly toward an ethical stand based on a reference to the real. This arresting of the most extreme implications of relativist historicism makes it a primary example of postmodernist historical fiction.

Irruptions of the Real

What makes the reading of *Between the Acts* presented thus far troubling, or at the very least problematic, is the way it seems to preclude an ethical dimension. That is,

while the novel does provide a detailed and chilling diagnosis of the pervasiveness of patriarchal discourse and ideology, it does not seem to offer its readers a way to fight against the pervasiveness of patriarchy or its contemporary political parallel, fascism. In fact, it seems to suggest that such a movement against patriarchal ideology is impossible. Because Woolf so adeptly presents how the world outside the text of the pageant reflects the patriarchal and imperialist ideology within it, and indeed that both of these texts reflect the primitive behavior of the hunters and gatherers in the prehistoric London that Lucy reads about in her *Outline of History*, there is the sense that there is nothing but repetition in history and that the principal reason for this repetition is the unavoidable internalization of the hegemony of patriarchy.¹⁹ That is, while the text of past patriarchy can be read, and even in some cases identified and deconstructed, it cannot be escaped. We are all within the archi-writing or general text of patriarchal history and like Isa, despite our objections to it and our efforts to ironize it, we cannot overturn it. To put it another way, while the idea of the “text” comprehends reality as such, there is no real beyond it, or no outside-of-the-text from which to critique it and act against it. Even the deconstructive double reading described above must be a double reading precisely because there can be no reading outside of the text itself as presented. While the critique of patriarchy is embedded in its iteration, in this case, the repetition of the dominant

discourse is necessary to make this critique possible, making a truth outside of patriarchy seem impossible to access.

While this reading explains the portions of the novel I have thus far discussed, a further reading of Woolf's novel shows that it acknowledges the pervasive discursive effects of patriarchy, while still insisting on a real outside of it from which a radical politics can be constructed. While *Between the Acts* denies the possibility of a cohesive and united artistic purity independent from reality, it also denies a radical relativism that denies any possibility of access to the real. In doing so, it makes a claim for feminism based not only on the denaturalization of patriarchal discourse, but also based on a claim for a more accurate history that affirms the reality of women's oppression and the possibility of a resistant politics with a purchase on material reality. While, as Hutcheon suggests, there may be "radical uncertainty" in the double reading of *Between the Acts* there is not an abandonment of the possibility of truthful representation.

Just as Hayden White sees traditional narrative history itself as coherent and unified, a fabrication constructed from narrative that excludes the real,²⁰ Woolf's novel notes the political repercussions of such arbitrary unity, indicating the ways that what once was acknowledged as mimetic history actually operates through the perspective of the patriarchal dominant and its storytelling forms. Unlike White, however, Woolf offers

us the possibility that there is a reality beyond patriarchal discourse that allows us to see beyond and beneath narrative construction and gives us a basis for fighting oppression. This is evident when at several moments in the novel, there are irruptions of chaos and dispersal which interrupt and challenge the unity and coherence of the story of patriarchal history and the artistic pageant that both reflects and critiques it.

The first irruption occurs when Isa reads of the rape of a girl by barracks officers at Whitehall.²¹ The soldiers, clearly representative of patriarchal British society, tell the girl of a horse with a green tail, making Isa imagine a fairy-tale story of romantic knights and fantastic tales. What follows, however, is a gang rape of the girl that is neither romantic nor fantastic. Instead, “That was real; so real that on the mahogany door panels she saw the Arch in Whitehall; through the Arch the barrack room; in the barrack room the bed, and on the bed the girl was screaming and hitting him about the face” (19). Here, the reality of the girl’s rape allows Isa to have a vision of horrific encounter, which although mediated by the newspaper account, exceeds that account and seems to allow her direct access to this traumatic moment. Like Giles Oliver, the soldiers within patriarchal discourse are likely symbols of heroism not in spite of, but because of their link to violence and conquest. The “horse with a green tail” emphasizes the romantic images of such knights and quests, which inevitably involve the “rescue” of a “damsel in

distress,” or the winning of a woman by a man. In this case, however, the actual event that occurs, or the fact of the rape, cannot be reconciled with a traditional patriarchal narrative like that of knights and damsels. As Catherine Wiley comments, “When Isa reads and recalls the newspaper account of a girl’s rape by soldiers in Whitehall, she alerts Woolf’s readers to the side of war that is rarely historicized” (13). To this it is important to add that the reason this side of war is not historicized is because of the difficulty in fitting such history into the patriarchal narratives that constituted the discipline of history itself, particularly at this time. In this disjunction between the singular event and the ideological narratives embedded in the collective historical consciousness is what Isa sees as real.

This distinction between the real and the patriarchally narratable is forwarded immediately before Isa’s encounter with the newspaper story as well, as she stands in the library, looking at books by Keats, Shelley, Yeats, and Donne. Despite her affection for these works of art, “none of them stopped her toothache” (18). The toothache here constitutes reality, the painful truth that no art or text can completely obscure. As Herbert Marder notes, “Fiction can invent a horse with a green tail, but behind that seductive image lurks a real rape” (“Alienation Effects” 431-32). Jane Marcus further elaborates Woolf’s passage on remembrance and forgetting, by noting ““what we must

remember' is the rape; 'what we must forget' is the male rewriting of women's history" ("Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny" 76). In the present context, Marcus here highlights the importance of remembering the real even though it is its narrativization and transformation into discourse that is more frequently provided in hegemonic representations. If the rape is elided or transformed into a story, it is reality itself that is lost.

In this regard, the newspaper account of the rape and Isa's reading of it are allied to the curious beginning of *Three Guineas* that lauds, somewhat disingenuously, the newspaper and the photograph. Although, as the photograph of Clementis in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* amply illustrates, both the photograph and the newspaper are prone to heavy mediation, deformation and manipulation of the truth, Woolf presents them here as symbolic of the access to the real that she sees as possible. She identifies the daily paper as "history in the raw" (7), while she offers the photograph as "pictures of actual facts [...] simply statements of fact addressed to the eye" (10). While she notes the ways in which soldiers not yet at war tend to valorize it, she likewise points out that photographs of actual war present a very different, and factually more accurate, picture. First she presents the sunny view of war presented in a soldier's biography, which is later supplemented by the biographer's affirmation of the soldier's "supreme" happiness:

“I have had the happiest possible life, and we have always been working for war, and have now got into the biggest in the prime of life for a soldier [...] Thank God, we are off in an hour. Such a magnificent regiment! Such men, such horses! Within ten days I hope Francis and I will be riding side by side straight at the Germans.” (*Three Guineas* 7)

This celebration of warfare is contrasted not only with an opposing feminist viewpoint, but with the “facts” of war that photographs present. “Besides these pictures of other people’s lives and minds—these biographies and histories—there are also pictures—pictures of actual facts; photographs” (10). What these pictures of the Spanish Civil War show Woolf and her readers is not the glory and romance of war, but rather, like the rape Isa reads about, war’s ugly reality.

They are not pleasant photographs to look upon. They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spilikins suspended in mid air. (11)

Although later in the essay Woolf voices extreme skepticism of the newspaper²² and, historically, the photograph too becomes open to manipulation,²³ it is clear that Woolf here wishes to distinguish between the stories told about war and the facts of war; that is, the real as defined by the suffering, death, and tragedy depicted in these photographs. It is these facts, this real, that becomes the basis for Woolf’s ethical stand

for pacifism in *Three Guineas*. Certainly, *Between the Acts* indicates the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideology that makes any possibility of breaking through this general text extremely difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, Isa's encounter with the story of the "rape" functions in the novel as the photographs of the Spanish Civil War do in *Three Guineas*, as an access to the reality of oppression, particularly women's oppression that cannot be reconciled with the stories of the glories of war and patriarchal history.

Likewise, this glimpse of the real seems to be a moment where the search for truth and therefore justice can begin. I will return to this moment and how the novel defines its encounter with the real.

Another irruption of the real occurs toward the end of the pageant, when Miss La Trobe attempts to release her hold on the unity and coherence of the pageant and to merely present the real of present time itself. Like John Cage's musical experiments, she presents nothing on the "stage" of the pageant itself and instead allows the audience to experience their present:

She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality. But something was going wrong with the experiment. 'Reality too strong,' she muttered. 'Curse 'em!' [...]. If only she'd a backcloth to hang between the trees—to shut out cows, swallows, present time! But she had nothing. She had forbidden music. [...]. This is death, death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind; when illusion fails. (125)

Reflecting the earlier passage in the novel and that in *Mrs. Dalloway*, death here is analogized with reality itself. However, while several critics point out that this failure of Miss La Trobe to achieve formal unity functions as a critique of and a commentary on fascist and patriarchal politics, few mark sufficiently that the disruption of this formal unity is importantly achieved by reality itself. Patricia Joplin asserts that Miss La Trobe here “bears a striking resemblance to a petty dictator in her will to re-impose unity on her fragile, dispersed, uncontrollable work of art” (88). Joplin, however, reads the novel as one which “celebrates rather than mourns the impossibility of final meaning” (89), in effect configuring it as antifascist in its postmodern assertion of the impossibility of metanarratives and the slippery relationship between referent, signifier and signified. In fact, Joplin, in a somewhat commonplace critical maneuver, analogizes a faith in the connection between signifier, signified and referent with political authoritarianism: “In both theme and structure, Wool’s last work becomes a meditation on the proximity of artist to dictator—of author to authoritarian ruler—when language is used as if there were no gap between sound and meaning, sign and referent” (89). That this gap exists, and is rather cavernous, is, of course, one of the central tenets of poststructural/postmodern theory. Likewise, Julie Vandivere asserts that Woolf in *Between the Acts*, “does not reinscribe epistemology or teleology; nor does she profess truth. Instead, she suggests on

a grammatical level that any reliance on posited reality will give way” (231). Here, both Joplin and Vandivere suggest that Woolf’s postmodern novel not only refuses unification, traditional epistemology and teleology, but also that truth itself and factual accuracy are subverted in the novel.

In a complementary viewpoint, Pamela Caughie offers *Between the Acts* as a text that treats “truth and reality as negotiable concepts” (54). Although, as Caughie argues, *Between the Acts* does frustrate attempts to fulfill most of the audience’s wishes “to leave the theatre knowing exactly what was meant” (54), it is also true that the novel does not completely relativize notions of “truth and reality,” despite its irrefutable challenge to traditional epistemology, teleology and narrative form. Rather, *Between the Acts* insists on our capacity to access the real despite its own attack on traditional means of presenting and representing the past.

Although the reading of *Between the Acts* as a postmodern celebration of the indeterminacy of meaning is useful and relevant to a world haunted by the specter of Hitler and threatened by a violently imposed unity, it also forwards the postmodern notion that *Between the Acts* encourages the dissolution of the real and the notion that access to reality, both historical and present is impossible. What is clear, however, is that while the novel does juxtapose chaos and order, dispersal and unity, part of this

juxtaposition is the analogizing of the chaotic and the dispersed with the real itself. Miss La Trobe allows for and encourages the intrusion of the real in the final act of the pageant, despite her anxiety when it becomes “too real,” while Isa gets a glimpse of reality itself when reading the newspaper article. That there is a gap between “sound and meaning” is emphasized repeatedly in the novel, but there is also a countervailing tendency to insist on the possibility of factual accuracy and to insist that some truths are not negotiable, as in the cases of the photographs and the rape. This countervailing tendency is the building block of Woolf’s feminist ethics in the novel and that ethic relies upon the rejection of narrative and the deployment of nonnarrative forms.

Narrativity as Reality and the Problem with Plot

The resistance of reality to artistic presentation is, as we have seen, central to several of Woolf’s essays. Hayden White’s brand of historiographic relativism later pinpoints this resistance particularly to the deformations of narrative, but Woolf’s own antagonism to traditional narrative is also clear in “Modern Fiction.” In that foundational essay, Woolf mocks not only the “series of gig lamps” symbolic of sequential progression, but also the reliance on actions and events that stimulate narratability, denying them both any epistemological privilege in the representation of reality: “if a

writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must [...] there would be no plot. [...] Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged” (106). Similarly, in terms of the historiographic debate, Christopher Lorenz summarizes, “The crucial narrativistic message in this context is that neither the mode of emplotment nor the viewpoint can be located in reality, but only in the linguistic universe of narrative. It is the historian who *imposes* a linguistic, literary structure on the past—in the past nothing real corresponds to it” (“Can Histories Be True?”311). Although Lorenz offers this view to critique it, it remains a fair, if reductive, account of a particular strain of historical narrativism. Again, Woolf’s views on “realistic” fiction parallel this critique narrative history; that is, she argues, it cannot approach reality because of its dependence on unity and structure.

While many countervailing arguments have been made defending narrative history’s claim to factual accuracy and explanatory truth within the historiographic debate, most of these objections are raised on philosophical and epistemological grounds arguing that narrative can have access to historical truth even if life itself is not structured as narrative. Although these objections have some validity, a countervailing view is taken exemplarily by David Carr,²⁴ particularly in his *Time, Narrative, and History*, and is key to the understanding of Woolf’s vision of history in *Between the Acts*.

Carr's objection is not that life can be mirrored in narrative despite their structural differences, but rather that life itself is structured as a narrative, particularly in the mental life of human beings. That is, in our daily life, we construct narratives to explain, predict and construct our activities. In claiming this, Carr refutes the narrativist assertion that "narrative is nothing but window dressing or packaging, something incidental in our knowledge of the past" (*Time* 9), and instead insists that "narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence, independently of our contemplating the past as historians" (*Time* 9). Carr argues that although it may be possible to theorize time outside of narrative, as Bergsonian *durée pure* or "now points," it is cognitively experienced as events or actions that have beginning, middles, and ends (i.e. narratives) and that the focus of human experience is largely on the future, or the prospective end of the narrative currently being experienced (*Time* 39- 41). While these mental narratives are always being configured and reconfigured as new experiences change expectations, life itself is envisioned as narrative(s).

Like experienced time [...] practical time involves at bottom a sequence of distinguishable events or event-phases that we live through or act out one at a time, one after the other, such that we are always "located" at one such point at a time. In both action and experience, however, this ever-changing point is a vantage point from which the other phases of the sequence, future and past, are grasped. (40)

Carr devotes much time and effort to illustrating how the phenomenological experience of reality is narratable, exploring the ways in which simple “short term actions and experiences” (49) are experienced as narrative by the participants. Although he stops short of claiming narration as an essential or natural human activity, he does, in accordance with Barbara Hardy, assert that it has become a “primary act of mind” that dominates action in the present, not merely in retrospective storytelling.²⁵ Likewise, he continues, the “self” is experienced as a narrative whose beginning and middle change dynamically over time, and whose end is predicted, if never fully experienced, through the mental narration. He finally extrapolates these principles to communities which construct narratives about themselves, particularly their origins and possible conclusions, and which in turn construct “histories” themselves. It is not my purpose here to assert the philosophical veracity or falsehood of Carr’s assertions, but it is essential to see how these principles are reflected in *Between the Acts* and how Woolf’s novel functions both as an affirmation of Carr’s diagnosis and a challenge to some of the fundamental ramifications of his reading. First, while the narrativism of White, Ankersmit, Mink, et. al. is often referred to as postmodern historiography and is allied with the relativism of French poststructural theory, it is clear that in at least one fundamental way Carr’s phenomenological analysis of life experienced *as* narrative is closer to Derridean thinking

than the narrativists. The narrativists see the fundamental problem of traditional narrative historiography in the crucial distinction between the reality of experienced existence (chaotic, disordered, random, inexplicable) and the order created by narrative (linear, progressive, causally connected, open to explanation). Carr's observation that life, although perhaps more random and inexplicable than we believe, is, in fact, *experienced* as narrative. In this way, reality is experienced much like a novel or a written history, in which each of us is the hero/ine of our own narrative, and our histories or fictions are, at least partially, reflections of how we experience the world, although how we experience the world may just as easily be heavily influenced by the narratives we read, watch or tell.

The supposedly relativistic Derridean assertion that "there is no outside-the-text" is then confirmed by the phenomenologically oriented Carr in the sense that Carr affirms that life is experienced as a text and vice-versa. Certainly, Woolf's novel offers us a similar assessment in *Between the Acts*, in which the characters outside the pageant reenact the narratives and roles of those within it, allowing their present behavior to be a copy of the narratives of the past, repeating the social scripts and plots of past narratives, particularly the patriarchal and imperialist plots which offer progress and coherence even at the expense of the lives of women, natives, and other marginalized peoples. It is here

that Woolf's novel and Carr's philosophy diverge, in their comparative analysis of the desirability of experiencing life as narrative.

Carr objects to the narrativist view that life is random and chaotic and therefore unlike narrative history. In this, Carr assesses the narrativists to be pessimistic. He observes that narrativists see narrative and particularly narrative histories as having meaning and causality, while life itself is a meaningless sequence of events. "The problem with theorists such as White and Mink is not that they postulate the possibility of such a meaningless sequence, but that they turn things upside down: they place it at the heart of human experience, giving us as sad and depressing [...] a picture of human reality as we can imagine" (89). On the other hand, Carr sees his own views as more optimistic, as he asserts that life too can have the inherent meaning and coherence that retrospective history confers. It is here that *Between the Acts* diverges from Carr's assertion. Although not specifically a tract of narrative theory, Woolf's novel instead notes the sad and depressing results of experiencing life as narrative in pointing out how these experienced plots are patriarchal in construction and in effect and are inherently harmful to Others, particularly women whose roles in patriarchal plots are sadly limited.

What the narrativists and Carr have in common is their assessment that narrative in general, and its primary constituent(s), plot and/or emplotment,²⁶ lend coherence,

meaning, and relief to a world that is otherwise characterized by randomness, chaos, and a lack of inherent meaning. In this both Carr and White and his fellow narrativists seem to agree with Eliot's assessment of art's purpose in "Ulysses, Order and Myth," providing structure where none exists. Woolf's novel rather suggests that plot itself is constricting, stultifying and oppressive, reproducing the power relations of patriarchy. As indicated by the novel's title, *Between the Acts* is interested in contrasting moments of action with what happens between these moments, or a lack of action itself. Since many definitions of narrative locate important actions as the prerequisite for narration itself, it becomes clear that Woolf's novel explores the possibilities and problematics of plotting. While the definition of narrative and plot has a long and varied history,²⁷ a common thread in these definitions of traditional narrative is the assertion that there must be some action or event that makes something narratable or worth narrating. That is, by most conventional definitions, *something* must happen to spark and sustain narrative interest, or, as many theorists put it, to stimulate readerly "desire" (see Chapter Two for a more complete exploration of these theorists). Woolf's critique of action itself is then part of her critique of narrative and vice versa.

A further definition of narrative, one favored by Carr, specifies the reliance of narrative on temporality and sequence. That is, a narrative must consist of at least two

events, connected through a progression of time and that indeed “narrative structure pervades our very experience of time” (*Time*9). Peter Brooks concurs with this definition of plot, noting that “not only does the reading of narrative take time; the time it takes to get from beginning to end [...] is very much part of our sense of narrative, what it has accomplished, what it means” (20). Likewise, the plot is that which unifies the events that occur over time, making them coherent, complete and related to one another. Plot, according to Brooks, among others, is that which pursues the secret that sparks readerly desire, and while Brooks notes that narrative itself can only be sustained as long as this secret is unexplained, its end goal is its explanation. If a grand or cataclysmic action is enough to begin or spark a narrative, the plot is that which pursues, unfolds and/or explains the causes or ramifications of that action (see Brooks 18). In this way, the plot ties together or unites action that might otherwise appear to be unrelated.

In one of the earliest discussion of plot, Aristotle asserts this principle in a different way. In summarizing Aristotle’s account, Brian Richardson writes, “[plot] needs to be complete and of a certain magnitude, and its beginning and end must not be arbitrary. A plot should have an organic unity and be free from irrelevant incidents; the events that compose it should be connected in a probable or necessary progression, rather than simply conjoined in an episodic sequence” (*Narrative Dynamics* 56). The corollary

of the “unified” and “complete” nature of narrative or plot is also offered here; that is, the removal of anything not necessary to the plot, or which is irrelevant. In agreement with this assertion, Roland Barthes offers that “art knows no static,” that is, where life contains many insignificant and irrelevant actions and events, these are either excluded from a proper narrative or invested with meaning so as to include them (see Carr, *Time* 13 -14, 58). In fact, the act of emplotment is assessed by Paul Ricoeur to be a “configurational act” that “grasps together” various elements and creates a unified whole out of them by looking at the series of events from their end point “reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we also learn to read time itself backwards” (Ricoeur 1:105; also see Carr, *Time* 64 -5). Carr asserts that this act of emplotment occurs not only in retrospective storytelling, but also dynamically in the process of living and in constructing our subjectivity. In either case, we can see how actions or events occur in time, while the plotting or emplotment of these events may be considered the order imposed on either dynamically or retrospectively. Narrative itself, in this context, may be conceived of as the telling, reading or experiencing of the plot. That is, while narrative itself is experienced in time, those events and actions that might be part of a narrative but are not part of the narrative being told or experienced, that are extraneous to the current

plot, are either retrospectively or concurrently and dynamically eliminated, leaving only a unified structure.

Although these definitions of narrative and plot are merely structural and seem politically and ethically innocuous, Woolf's novel serves both to destroy our sense of what we should ethically expect from a narrative and to advocate for a mode of nonnarrativity that does not lead us to the same ethical and political conclusions as that offered by traditional narrative. While traditional narrative predicates itself upon action, Woolf's novel questions the validity and value of action itself. In fact, although Woolf's novel does not often explicitly confront the notion of narrative, as such, its abstraction from specific actions to a more abstract concept of action correlates with the attempt to theorize narrative itself. When Giles crushes the snake, his movements are explained: "But it was action. Action relieved him. He strode to the barn, with blood on his shoes." Here, "action" as such, is correlated with the active masculine principle in which action for its own sake is translated into violence. In this, the action configured by much narrative theory as merely necessary to raise narrative interest is already and always violent. For Woolf, although action sparks narrative desire, it is ironically action itself that we should not, indeed must not, desire.

Likewise, the “acts” referred to in the title have multiple significations, nearly all of them reflective of Woolf’s condemnation of patriarchy. Certainly, the most literal and obvious of its meanings is the sense that the “real” story of the novel takes place not in the pageant, but between its theatrical Acts. As we have seen, the actions in the pageant are reflective of accepted patriarchal history and of the patriarchal discourse out of which it is constructed. The notion of a place *between* these Acts may then refer to a women’s history and reality obscured by the Acts of the pageant and the actions of men. Likewise, the “between the acts” of the title refers clearly to its setting between the two World Wars. Although published in 1941, in the midst of the second of the two great conflicts, the novel is set in 1939, before England joins in the fight against Hitler, and is thus properly between these two great Acts of British history. As Patricia Joplin notes, “Mid-summer, 1939, the moment Woolf’s fiction represents, was the last interval of ‘normal’ life before Britain ceased to be a spectator and became an actor in the war” (92). Here, Joplin’s choice of a theatrical metaphor reflects Woolf’s own use of action versus its lack. The correlation of the wars with acts or actions serves to contrast the violence of action with the nonviolence of passivity, and Woolf’s famous pacifism is not only here associated with peace but also with the passivity that is juxtaposed with the action of war and the hyper-masculinity of Giles who performs violence for its own sake and for the

relief it gives him. In tying this to an nonnarrative strain in Woolf's novel, it is sufficient to note that where action is the prerequisite for narrative itself, Woolf's title suggests the difficult necessity of avoiding the acts themselves and instead finding the spaces between them. Although we have already observed how Giles's actions seem part of an unavoidable and endlessly repeating plot, or archi-writing, that is difficult to escape, Woolf's novel makes an attempt to imagine a world without plot and therefore, possibly, without patriarchy.

Woolf's aversion to and critique of plot as a concept is not original to *Between the Acts*, of course, as both her theoretical and fictional writings examine the concept of plot in a multitude of ways throughout her career. In "Modern Fiction," Woolf was already objecting to the necessity of plot in fiction.

So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. (105-106)

The oppressiveness of plot and its role in "embalming" fiction is not merely, however, as this essay suggests, due to its reliance on convention and its obscuring of ineffable "life." Rather, as the foreboding notion of plot as a powerful and "unscrupulous tyrant"

suggests, plot itself is tied, in other works, to patriarchal hegemony and domination. Indeed, as Susan Stanford Friedman argues, the seemingly purely formalist innovations in “Modern Fiction” are transformed into a feminist social and political agenda in *A Room of One’s Own*: “Woolf’s advocacy in *A Room of One’s Own* of a feminine style and sequence conflates feminism and modernism in a radical way” (162). In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf not only critiques plot and narrative, but suggests that these forms, as they have been traditionally practiced, are fundamentally antithetical to women’s state of mind and artistic inclinations. When she argues that women must “break the sentence” and “break the sequence” of traditional narrative, she is insisting on an explosion of the narrative form itself. When she says in appreciation of the mythical Mary Carmichael, “First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence” (*Room of One’s Own* 2196), she is appreciating and advocating the subversion of narrative itself. As Friedman observes, “Narrative is understood to be a mode that foregrounds a *sequence* of events that move dynamically in space and time” (164; emphasis in original). The breaking of that sequence is not only a formal innovation, but a refusal of the “tyranny” of a patriarchal form that is a contributor to social and political tyranny as well.

Between the Acts’ aversion to the ethics of traditional plot is evidenced in many ways, but is most explicitly expressed by Isa who, in observing the convoluted plot of the

pastiche of Renaissance drama, thinks to herself; “Did the plot matter? She shifted and looked over her right shoulder. The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot. Perhaps Miss La Trobe meant that when she cut this knot in the centre? Don’t bother about the plot, the plot’s nothing (67). Where plot is normally seen as central to any assessment of a work of narrative or its meaning, Isa asserts that such attention to “what happens” and how it is tied together is irrelevant. Isa here refers to the cacophony that occurs in the midst of the playlet, making it impossible to extricate the plot, “There was such a medley of things going on, what with the beldame’s deafness, the bawling of the youths, and the confusion of the plot that she could make nothing of it” (67). Here, in fact, the playlet fails to meet the requirements of an ideal plot offered by Aristotle in its inclusion of the static that does not have direct relevance for the meaning and/or resolution of the story.

It is then this deviation from plot as such that allows Isa to have insight into its lack of importance, instead placing emphasis on the emotions invoked. Even here, however, Isa is constrained by the patriarchal discourses and plots she has witnessed in the pageant and in her own social milieu, identifying only two possible emotions, each stemming from traditional patriarchal plots, the marriage plot (love) and the plot of masculine competition (hate). It is only after the scene comes to a conclusion and the

beldame dies that Isa identifies a third possible emotion, stemming, it seems, from a lack of plot itself: “She fell back lifeless. The crowd drew away. Peace, let her pass. She to whom all’s one now, summer or winter. Peace was the third emotion. Love. Hate. Peace. Three emotions made the ply of human life” (68). Although there may be additional emotions in “human life,” here it appears that Isa identifies an additional emotion not normally conceived to be an emotion at all but rather, perhaps, its absence, and one that is not associated with patriarchal action, but with the feminist pacifism advocated in *Three Guineas*. In seeing beyond the traditional male plots of the pageant, Isa gets a glimpse of the peace for which the novel expresses hope, if not confidence.

The inclusion of the static that is not part of the plot proper in the Renaissance playlet is then repeated and redeployed in the novel as a whole. As any cursory reading of the novel will indicate, *Between the Acts* is full of ambient noise, particularly snippets of conversation among the audience members, natural sounds of animals and birds, and, at one crucial moment, the sound of airplanes flying by, drowning out the speech of Reverend Streatfield. While it might be possible to extract elements of all of this noise and identify it as important to a particular strand of plot, much of it seems merely included to indicate the atmosphere of the day of the pageant and, indeed, can obscure the plot and its linear progression more than contribute to it. Here, again, Woolf’s novel, in

its form as well as its content, obscures the reader's access to the plot, as such, and indicates its opposition to the rigid linear plotting that is associated with patriarchy throughout the novel. A representative passage illustrates the inclusion of static:

Then when Mr. Streatfield said: One spirit animates the whole - the airplanes interrupted. That's the worst of playing out of doors. ... Unless of course she meant the very thing ... Dear me, the parking arrangements are not what you might call adequate ... I shouldn't have expected either so many Hispano-Suizas ... That's a Rolls... That's a Bentley ... That's the new type of Ford. ... To return to the meaning—Are machines the devil or do they introduce a discord ... Ding dong, ding...by means of which we reach the final ... Ding dong. ... Here's the car with the monkey... Hop in ... And good-bye, Mrs. Parker ... Ring us up. Next time we're down don't forget ... Next time ... Next time... (139-40)

Although some of this passage might be said to integrate clearly with the novel's themes, and others less clearly, the effect is of a random collage of static much of which (the parade of cars, the Hispano-Suizas, the monkey) exceed any unifying narrative trajectory that might be labeled plot. While Aristotle argues that plot should be unified and all action should be important to the story, Woolf's inclusion of such ambient noise is an implicit objection to Aristotelian notions of plot.²⁸

The aversion to traditional narrative is also clear in several other important symbolic moments in the novel, particularly the comparison of the two paintings discussed at the opening of this chapter and the legend associated with the Pointz Hall lily pool. Both of these episodes contrast circumstances that generate narratable stories with an alternative in closer contact with the real. It is initially clear that the ancestor in

the portrait is a representative of history, while the painting of the lady is merely a picture, an example of disinterested and pure art. Not coincidentally, the portrait of the male ancestor is a clear symbol of patriarchy, while the picture, at least partially, symbolizes its feminine opposite. Finally, the portrait is linked with the process of narrative and narration, while the picture is associated with the lack of narration or nonnarratability. The portrait is said to be a “talk producer” (30) and this essentially means that it is a narrative-producer, providing the impetus for the stories of Colin the hound and Buster the horse, as well as the ancestor’s crusade for their inclusion in the portrait. The picture on the other hand is seen to produce the very opposite of narration, “In her yellow robe, leaning, with a pillar to support her, a silver arrow in her hand, and a feather in her hair, she led the eye up, down, from the curve to the straight, through glades of greenery and shades of silver, dun and rose into silence” (30). Although the bulk of this description is devoted to the visual impact of the picture, it leads not to talk, but to silence, the absence of both talk and narration: “Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent” (30). These lines, immediately following those above, attempt to convey what a nonnarrative world might sound like and feel like.

Another key ingredient, that of temporality, is also eliminated here, for not only is the picture and the room in which it hangs “silent” but the novel conveys it as outside of

time: “The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence” (30). The contrast here of the portrait (historical, patriarchal, and narrative), with the picture (ahistorical, feminine, and nonnarrative) conveys how Woolf’s stand against war and patriarchy must be carried out not through stories that counter traditional patriarchal narratives in content but imitate them in form, but rather, more appropriately, through nonnarrative expressions that more closely approximate or access the real by refusing available plots in the archi-writing of patriarchy and, indeed, plot itself.

While several critics have noted Woolf’s skepticism towards and objections to the idea of plot both in *Between the Acts* and in her other novels, often these objections to the unity of plot are configured as an alternative unity, associated with the pre-Oedipal unity of the lyric, and not associated with the materiality of the historical real. Honor McKittrick Wallace’s clearly delineated definitions of narrative and lyric are helpful in this regard: “narrative is the formal expression of linear, teleological movement that is at the very least metaphorically linked, if not driven by, masculine desire, while lyric is the attempt to subvert narrative’s linearity by positing a timelessness linked to feminine desire” (177). It is clear that this definition of lyric intersects with and illustrates the

instances of the picture and the lily pond in *Between the Acts*, particularly through their connection to timelessness and silence, as opposed to sequentiality and talk. While the lyric approach to these passages obscure Woolf's crucial claims to historical materiality, it does help indicate Woolf's anti-narrative strain and its origins in feminism, or at the very least in feminine desire.²⁹

This is not to say that women in the novel are exempted from the tendency to narrativize, nor to say that they too cannot be at the center of traditional narrative. Women like Isa and Mrs. Manresa take central roles in patriarchal narrative and women's inclusion in the tendency to narrativize is further seen in the story of the lily pool. The lily pool behind Pointz Hall is a site, like the portrait of the ancestor, which is "talk-producing." The legend, perpetuated by the servants, is that in the "deep centre" of the pool a "lady" had drowned herself. Ten years after, the pool had been dredged and only a sheep's thigh bone had been recovered. Nevertheless, the servants insist on the death of the lady and the subsequent presence of a ghost at Pointz Hall. Here again, the "stories" of the lady's suicide, undoubtedly over a failed romance, is contrasted with the reality of the dead sheep and the absence of ghost stories. Here we see how narration is constructed largely of the desire to uncover and explain "secrets," particularly gothic secrets, even if the secrets must be fabricated in order to uncover them.³⁰

In contrast, the initial description of the lily pool has several similarities to the description of the “picture” of the lady:

There had always been lilies there, self-sown from wind-dropped seed, floating red and white on the green plates of their leaves. Water, for hundreds of years, had silted down into the hollow, and lay there four or five feet deep over a black cushion of mud. Under the thick plate of green water, glazed in their self-centered world, fish swam—gold, splashed with white, streaked with black or silver. Silently they manoeuvred in their water world, poised in the blue patch made by the sky or shot silently to the edge where the grass, trembling, made a fringe of nodding shadow. On the water-pavement, spiders printed their delicate feet. A grain fell and spiralled down; a petal fell, filled and sank. At that the fleet of boat-shaped bodies paused; poised; equipped; mailed; then with a waver of undulation off they flashed. (34-5)

Here, the effect is of a piece of artwork observed, with the beautiful colors once again silently integrating with one another, balancing and moving without explanation, eternally and naturally maintaining a unity without a linear progression or narration. In this, Renée Watkins sees one of the central thematic notes of the novel; “Like Proust, [Woolf] is committed to the study[...] of the moment, to the observation of its many dimensions, as they interlock. Unlike him, she looks outside society, to nature, in hopes of finding reliably real things [...]. The force of the paragraph [...] derives from its reverence for natural things” (364). Watkins points to how *Between the Acts* does try to locate a “real” outside-the-text of a society that is dominated by patriarchy. While art, via Eliot, may at first be an appropriate extra-textual location, Woolf’s treatment of the pageant indicates how art is more likely to repeat, reflect, and even generate, the plots of

lived history than to be exclusive from them. Here, nature and its observation seems to offer an anti-narrational “reliably real thing,” but even the lily pool becomes a site for narration and explanation, as opposed to mystery and silence, through the story of the lady and her ghost, as well as in the treatment of the pool by Bartholomew Oliver, who explains the beauty of the fish by the “reasonable” and biological imperative for sex (143), silencing his sister’s objections. The heteronormative plot of reproduction explains away the mystery of the pool in several ways, transforming the reliably real and extra-textual into one of the most common social plots. While the picture and the lily pool do become Woolfian possibilities for anti-narration, characterized by their silence, beauty, and inexplicability, they can only have limited success in countering the patriarchal imperatives of narration. Both are easily re-integrated and explained in some of the most common patriarchal social plots particularly in patriarchy’s tendency to define women as “silent,” “inexplicable” and “beautiful.”³¹

Bergson’s Present and Woolf’s “Moments of Being”

Watkins’s reference to Proust allows us entry into another way that both Woolf’s novel and La Trobe’s pageant attempt to overcome the overwhelming imperatives of narrative and the archi-writing of social plotting; through its rejection of temporality itself

and the focus on the present moment. Importantly, however, this present moment is not defined merely as an evanescent, fleeting non-presence or as a timeless paradise that pre-dates the temporality of narrative (see note 29) but as a moment both of unlimited promise and of substantial ontological materiality. Watkins's reference to Proust calls to mind Carr's reference to Bergsonian "now points" or to bring the reference closer to home, Woolf's "moments of being." It is not novel to read many modernists, and Woolf in particular, through Bergson and his definition(s) of memory and consciousness, but it is productive to revisit this point briefly through the lens of nonnarrative approaches to the real, particularly in light of Woolf's and La Trobe's overt attempts to theorize the present in *Between the Acts*. Bergson's theory of memory and the present is quite complicated and would be impossible to rehearse here in its totality.³² Nevertheless, central to Bergson's theory is his insistence on the radically dual, and dialectic, nature of consciousness and time. While a convenient shorthand of Bergsonian philosophy often allies Bergson with the radically relativist philosophers who offer the world, and particularly the experience of time, as a creation of the human mind, in fact Bergson insists on both the centrality of consciousness to our experience of time and on the materiality of a world external to that mind. In this, Woolf's theorization of the present in *Between the Acts* is remarkably similar.

Bergson insists that both time and consciousness can be conceived of as pure continuity, in a constant state of flux and impossible to divide into definable and stable moments of any size. Because time is motion and is never reducible to a present moment, and because each present moment eclipses the one previous to it, matter itself seems to be eclipsed within the perpetual movement of time and consciousness, which together constitute memory. At the same time, however, Bergson insists on the central presence of matter itself, and the substantiality of the natural world as independent from consciousness. “My brain is a part of the material world; therefore it is absurd to suppose, with the idealists, that it produces, or is a condition of, all other images: if we cancel the world we cancel the brain along with it” (Kolakowski 39).³³ The seeming philosophical contradiction here is evident, as Bergson seems to suggest that there are two modes of existence: one of memory, consciousness and time that is constantly moving and one of solidity and matter which is of an entirely different order from the mysteries of time and consciousness (*durée*).³⁴ Yet, Bergson insists there is a connection between these worlds, even if that connection is difficult to ascertain or to articulate. As John Mullarkey explains, “[*Matter and Memory*] wants to establish a connection between the enduring mind and an enduring world without getting caught up in the one-upmanship of trying to reduce the origins of either one to the other” (33). In order to do this, the present moment

is of central importance, because “*the present itself is only the most contracted level of the past*. This time [the present] it is pure present and pure past, pure perception and pure recollection as such, pure matter and pure memory[...] and thus rediscover[s] an ontological unity” (Deleuze 74; emphasis in original). That is, while matter and memory seem to be of fundamentally different orders, they come together in the present, because it is only in the present that matter can be said to exist. While time eclipses the matter of the previous moment, it is in the present that consciousness as memory meets matter, in effect transforming it from matter into memory via consciousness.³⁵ Because of this, Bergson writes, “the present is that which interests me, which lives for me, and in a word, that which summons me to action; in contrast my past is essentially powerless” (*Matter and Memory* 137). In identifying the past as powerless, Bergson conceives of a moment of an “ideal present” that separates the past from the future, but at the same time, he notes the impossibility of such a moment,

What is, for me, the present moment? The essence of time is that it goes by; time already gone by is the past and we call the present the instant in which it goes by. But there can be no question here of a mathematical instant. No doubt there is an ideal present— a pure conception the indivisible limit which separates past from future. But the real, concrete, live present— that of which I speak when I speak of my present perception—that present necessarily occupies a duration.” (*Matter and Memory* 137)

Bergson's attempt to theorize an "ideal present," a commonplace of theorizations of temporality, is immediately undercut by his assertion that such a present cannot exist because the real present always has duration and is always moving. Still, for Bergson the present *does* exist, is material and is always therefore present, if just out of our grasp. This is not, however, for Bergson, and importantly for Woolf, merely a matter of abstract philosophical pondering, but is also an important statement about the possibility of human freedom and the possibility of social, political, and ethical change.

As Leszek Kolakowski writes, the importance of Bergson's present is that "each moment carries within it the entire flow of the past and each is new and unrepeatable" (3). That is, while the present moment bears the burden of the entirety of the past (and all of its plots, the burden of which Isa feels in *Between the Acts*), it is also the one moment that is not purely part of the past, not strictly on the order of consciousness, but is also simultaneously part of the world of matter, on the order of the real and filled with the possibility of exceeding the plots of the past. In this case, it is the one moment when true freedom is possible, the freedom to move beyond our own history, our repeated social plots and to instead create and experience something new. As Kolakowski paraphrases Bergson:

All the components of the question of freedom are altered once we realize that real temporal succession occurs only in the mind and is projected onto matter. In real time, in the life of consciousness, there is a perfect

continuity, and our self is at every moment, as it were, in a state of being born, absorbing its past and creating its future; it has a history, no doubt, it even *is* its history stored in memory, but it cannot go through the same state again; such a miracle would amount to the reversal of time. (21)

Still, while each moment in consciousness is a freedom from the past and “creating the future,” each of these moments is only free in the present moment, in the precise moment where consciousness meets matter itself. That is, freedom does not depend only on “free play” in the abstract realm of consciousness or signification but must, of necessity, equally rely on the materiality of the present.³⁶

Similarly, if not identically to Bergson, Woolf theorizes and shows a version of life that is not completely dominated by the plots of the past, and instead gives us the possibility of a present that exceeds the scripted plots of daily reality, and offers a real outside-the-text of those plots. In this, she offers a way to form an ethics counter to that generated by the plots of patriarchal and imperialist society. Her theorization of such a possibility is most clearly elaborated in *Moments of Being*, the collection of autobiographical writings published posthumously in 1976, and most explicitly in the long autobiographical fragment, “A Sketch of the Past.”

Jeanne Schulkind’s introduction to *Moments of Being* summarizes Woolf’s theory of “moments of being” like this: “the individual in his daily life is cut off from ‘reality’ but at rare moments receives a shock. These shocks or ‘moments of being’ are not [...]

simply random manifestations of some malevolent force but ‘a token of some real thing behind appearances’” (17).³⁷ In this, Woolf offers the possibility of a vision “behind the scenes” or “between the acts” even when she seems to foreclose such a vision, as she does by showing how Giles, Isa, and the audience, like the pageanteers, are within a play not outside of one. The application of “moments of being” to *Between the Acts* is evident if we return to the novel’s rare and fleeting irruptions of the real. Isa gains a vision of the “real” beyond the archi-writing of patriarchy when she sees the rape, and for her this is a moment of being, a vision of the “real thing” obscured by the “daily life” permeated by hegemony.

Most readings of Woolf’s vision of “moments of being” see them, similarly to Schulkind, as “the vision of reality as a timeless unity which lies beneath the appearance of change, separation and disorder that marks daily life” (18): that is, as a moment of unity inherent to reality, when the world, to all appearances, is disjointed and disconnected. However, what is actually forwarded by Woolf, both in *Between the Acts* and in “A Sketch of the Past” does not suggest that such unity is beautiful and timeless. Rather, particularly in the novel, it is clear that if the chaos and disorder of daily existence is unified, it is because it is largely controlled and permeated by patriarchy. Likewise, “moments of being” like those experienced by Isa introduce discontinuity into

this pattern. While the lily pool and the lady's picture may, in one sense, be a beautiful unified vision, they are, in another sense, that which is discontinuous with the plot of daily life, the real outside-the-text of patriarchal reality. It is this vision of the real, or moments of being, as precisely discontinuous, non-unified, and therefore fundamentally anarchic and chaotic, that lends *Between the Acts*' vision of the real its frightening and dystopian edge, whereas elsewhere in the Woolfian oeuvre it seems to be unifying and a source of hope.

Certainly in "A Sketch of the Past," where the idea is formally discussed, moments of being are both encounters with the real and encounters with the unified and transcendent. Woolf offers moments of non-being as those which make up the majority of lived existence, the life that is not "lived consciously" but is merely the "nondescript cotton wool" of the repetition and recapitulation of everyday activities (70). "Moments of Being" on the other hand, are, as Schulkind notes, "shocks" that give a revelation of the real, which is also order; "it is or will become a revelation of some order, a token of some real thing behind appearances" ("A Sketch" 72). Woolf here is describing her vision of a flower, which, like the vision of the lady's picture and the lily pool in *Between the Acts* is a vision of perfect unified beauty and that "behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we— I mean all human beings— are connected with this; that the whole

world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art” (“A Sketch” 72). In this, Woolf sounds a bit like Reverend Streatfield and his interpretation of the pageant as a vision of unification. “Each is part of the whole. [...] Scraps, orts, and fragments! Surely we should unite!” (133-34). Streatfield, however, is described as “a piece of church furniture” and as a “a butt, a clod, laughed at by looking-glasses; ignored by the cows, condemned by the clouds,”(132-33) making his vision of unification suspect, particularly when it is immediately followed by the circulation of the collection baskets and the transformation of the pageant into a fundraising opportunity. However, another description of a moment of being in “A Sketch of the Past” allows alternative possibilities to the vision of unification Streatfield offers.

As a child then, my days, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton wool, this non-being. Week after week passed at St. Ives and nothing made any dint upon me. Then for no reason that I know about, there was a violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life. I will give a few instances. The first: I was fighting with Thoby on the lawn. We were pomelling each other with our fists. Just as I raised my fists to hit him, I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there and let him beat me. I remember the feeling. It was a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of something terrible; and of my own powerlessness. I slunk off alone, feeling horribly depressed. (“A Sketch” 71)

It is not easy to correlate this strange experience with the vision of the flower, the painting, or the lily pool, but it is clear here that Woolf has a vision of an ethics that resides outside the dominant cultural symbolic, or the general text of patriarchy. That

this moment of past experience is a moment of pacifism, and is discussed near the outbreak of World War II, makes this memory a simultaneously political construction and a belief in a universal ethics generated from real experience that resists and transcends social scripting. Woolf's pacifism is not coherent in a patriarchal culture dominated by violent competition and is thus outside that text. At the same time, it can be viewed as a Bergsonian present in its correlation with a reality behind the scenes of daily existence, a solid and perceivable instant where matter and truth itself are visible. In this Bergsonian present there is a freedom not to merely follow the scripts and plots of the past, but to make a new choice, an active decision in the material world of the present, that changes the nature not only of one's own consciousness, but of the world it encounters in that moment. Woolf extends the idea of the Bergsonian present into the past by locating particular moments of anti-narrativity that exceed hegemonic plotting and, in so doing, reveal their status as real.

In many ways, this moment is the precise opposite of the explanation Streatfield provides of the pageant. Streatfield comes forward to try to sum up the pageant's events and to place meaning upon it. Streatfield tries to "read time itself backwards," as Ricoeur suggests, by coming in at the end of the pageant and placing a unifying plot upon it. He offers to the assembled crowd, "To me [...] it was indicated that we are members of one

another,. Each is part of the whole. [...] We act different parts; but are the same,” (133-34) but in the middle of his speech, in the middle of a word, twelve RAF airplanes in formation streak across the sky, drowning out his voice. These planes are often taken to be a pessimistic³⁸ undercutting of the Reverend’s attempt to provide an optimistic unifying vision of the pageant, but in fact these planes underscore the Reverend’s message, as he attempts to unify and homogenize into a single plot the disparate “orts, scraps and fragments” of the pageant, just as Hitler attempts to unify Europe into the plot of German superiority and hegemony. The planes and Streatfield’s speech reflect Woolf’s account of the parallels of Hitlerism abroad and patriarchy at home. This is not to say that Woolf does not have a very strong attraction to unified visions and works of art throughout her career, but it is in *Between the Acts* that she most clearly expresses the ethical and political dangers of trusting a unifying vision, sustained by narrative. Woolf’s vision in a “Sketch of the Past” is both a vision of a past moment³⁹ as real and a rejection of the violent unification that Streatfield attempts to inflict upon the scraps, orts, and fragments of the pageant and the past. Unification, then, is not always shorthand for beauty, but is often a plot which excludes and marginalizes that which does not fit into its borders. In the case of Woolf’s pacifist childhood encounter with her brother, that which is outside, abject, “something terrible,” “powerless,” and “depressed” provides the

moment of being. The closest parallel in *Between the Acts* to this moment of dislocating and isolating pacifism in “A Sketch of the Past” is Miss Latrobe’s attempt to make her audience experience the present itself, or a Bergsonian moment of the ideal present, outside of temporality, outside plotting, and in a very real sense, free.

The Pageant and the Present

Miss La Trobe’s Victorian playlet is followed by one last intermission before which the audience is to be presented with the final Act of the pageant: “the Present time. Ourselves.” During this intermission, the novel takes great pains to present a nonnarrative situation. Rather than presenting great acts, causally and tightly connected with a unified purpose, *Between the Acts* takes the opportunity to mention and highlight those intervening moments between the acts that are not part of conventional plotting, the moments of inaction: “They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle. Nothing happened. The tick of the machine was maddening” (123) This moment of inaction is reiterated more fully on the following page: “All their nerves were on edge. They sat exposed. The machine ticked. There was no music. The horns of cars on the high road were heard. And the swish of trees. They were neither one thing nor the other; neither Victorians nor themselves. They were suspended, without being, in limbo. Tick,

tick, tick, went the machine” (124). And again; “The audience fidgeted. Sounds of laughter came from the bushes. But nothing whatsoever appeared on the stage” (124-5). La Trobe’s ticking machine dramatizes the passage of time without action, the possibility of time’s motion without unifying plot to give it purpose.

While the Pointz Hall residents wait for the plot to resume, Woolf, who has already put into question the ethical and moral efficacy of a dependency on plot, shows the dis-ease nevertheless associated with its lack. Significantly, these fleeting moments of inaction and discomfort are immediately preceded by Lucy Swithin’s mental attempt at unification, or what she calls “one-making.”

She was off, they guessed, on a circular tour of the imagination—one-making. Sheep, cows, grass, trees, ourselves — all are one. If discordant, producing harmony — if not to us, to a gigantic ear attached to a gigantic head. And thus —she was smiling benignly —the agony of the particular sheep, cow, or human being, is necessary; and so —she was beaming seraphically at the gilt vane in the distance — we reach the conclusion that *all* is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall. Her eyes now rested on the white summit of a cloud. (122)

Swithin’s urge to create unity reflects the Aristotelian idea of plotting, in which everything must have its place and, in this case, create harmony, although it does not follow the conventional notion of plot that unites action in time. Rather, it creates a moment of unity that is not predicated upon action or temporality, resembling the lyricism that many critics suggest Woolf substitutes for plot (see note 29). Indeed, unlike

Isa and Bart, who mock Lucy internally, Woolf cannot be said here to be dismissing Mrs. Swithin's point-of-view out of hand. After all, Woolf's perspective in both "The Narrow Bridge of Art" and "Phases of Fiction" stresses the necessity of balancing the beauty of unity with the realism of the chaos of life itself in order to create art. Still, however, Miss Swithin's attempts to exert unity and harmony on life seems more of an escape or retreat from the violent and patriarchal plots exhibited in the pageant than an attempt to confront and overcome them. In contrast, the pageant's, and the novel's, attempt to exclude itself from this plot may sacrifice the unifying features of beautiful art in an attempt to gain a real with a purchase on non-patriarchal ethics.

In order to achieve this effect, La Trobe not only attempts to present time passing without accompanying action, but also the possibility of an ideal present without accompanying temporality. She does this by presenting the present itself in three different phases. The first of these is in the presentation of merely "present time" without any accompanying action onstage. Again, her stage notes read: "'Try ten mins. of present time. Swallow, cows, etc.' She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality" (125). The audience assumes, of course, that the ten minutes are just an extended intermission and angrily wonder how long La Trobe will keep them waiting. The pressure of a lack of plot introduces discontinuity into the

pageant and into the lives of the audience, as expectations, in particular the explicability of the accepted general text, are frustrated. Actions are replaced with inaction and the progression of uniform time that is also central to traditional plotting is interrupted. In this way, the marriage of action and temporality that is plot is here dissolved.

Although the introduction of reality into the pageant is, in fact, La Trobe's goal here, she is not prepared for the discomfort and dis-ease associated with it. When she feels that "Reality [is] too strong" (125), she feels the same "hopeless sadness" and "powerlessness" that Woolf describes in her memoir during her moment of being. Whereas action, control and unity are the configurational acts of traditional, and therefore patriarchal, plotting, the attempt to let go of the power to form and unite, although perhaps ethically necessary, is an uncharted and uncomfortable waterway to navigate. It is for this reason, it seems, that "panic seized [Miss La Trobe]. Blood seemed to pour from her shoes" (125), and that she analogizes this moment with the trauma of death itself, "this is death, death, death, she noted in the margin of her mind" (125). As I explore more fully in the following chapter, death is frequently analogized with the cessation of plot itself and the aversion to plot here is inextricably linked to La Trobe's experience of "death."

The death here is not, of course, literal or biological but has more in common with what Slavoj Žižek, following Lacan, calls a “symbolic death.” or more explicitly a “symbolic suicide.” “The act done (or more appropriately endured) [...] is that of *symbolic suicide*: an act of ‘losing all,’ of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the ‘zero point,’ from that point of absolute freedom called by Hegel, ‘abstract negativity.’” (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 43). This point of freedom resembles the moment of freedom in the present that Bergson offers and Žižek here calls upon, specifically, Ingrid Bergmann’s encounter with the volcano in Rossellini’s *Stromboli*⁴⁰ for his example. Žižek points to Bergmann’s decision to jettison herself from the demands of social relations available to her on the patriarchally-dominated Italian island of Stromboli. She ascends to the top of a volcano and, in Žižek’s reading, decides to no longer participate in the “symbolic order” or prescribed social relations of the island and instead to do something new. What, in particular, her next move will be is unclear in the Italian version of the film, while the United States version finds Bergmann’s character (Karin) finding God and returning to the village with a new internal symbolic stemming from her religiosity. Žižek denotes the ambiguity of the Italian conclusion as the depiction of an encounter with the Real, as “in the face of the primordial power of the volcano, all social ties pale into insignificance, she is reduced to her bare ‘being there’:

running away from the oppressive social *reality*, she encounters something incomparably more horrifying, the *Real*.” While this is horrifying, after “we pass through the ‘zero point’ of the symbolic suicide,” it also “changes miraculously into supreme bliss — *as soon as we renounce all symbolic ties*” (Zizek, *Enjoy* 42-43; emphasis in original).

La Trobe’s ten minutes of “nothing” parallels Zizek’s account of Karin’s experience at the volcano in La Trobe’s rejection, or at least, retreat, from the prescribed symbolic, plot, or archi-writing of her community. Her decision to extricate herself from her community’s plot (and, indeed, the concept of “plot” itself) reduces her to “being there,” an experience she, at first, also attempts to confer upon her audience. In this attempt she, like Karin, feels the “horrifying” effects of removal from “symbolic ties,” in particular through the eyes of the audience. Her “horrifying” encounter is experienced through the eyes of the audience, as she sees herself, through them, as abject “other,” outside of the network of social relations. “She felt everything they felt,” (125) but at the same time attempts to disassociate herself from them: “Audiences were the devil. O to write a play without an audience — *the play*” (125). Her reliance on the audience and their symbolic/social recognition does not allow her symbolic suicide to be complete, but once she passes *through* this moment and “renounces all symbolic ties” (or at the very least acknowledges the dissolution of such ties) by noting the failure of illusion and her

experience of “death,” her attitude and the experience of the pageant itself begins to resemble “supreme bliss” more closely than an idea of the “horrific Real.”⁴¹

As the conventional patriarchal “plot” of linear order and unity is dissolved through the non-narrational inaction of the pageant, a new order begins to form as it begins to rain. “Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears” (125). La Trobe sees the rain as creating a new unity for her pageant and begins to believe that her decision to act in the open air has paid off, dissolving the pain and anguish recently experienced through her failure with the audience. Indeed, Isa experiences the rain as if “they were all people’s tears, weeping for all people [...]. The rain was sudden and universal” (126). The connection achieved here between La Trobe and Isa is followed by the playing of a gramophone record employed earlier in the pageant, saying, “*The King is in his counting house/Counting out his money,/ The Queen is in her parlour*” (126; emphasis in original). These lines, to this point in the novel, comment parodically on the patriarchal plot as it has been sketched out in the historical pageant. That is, the King is configured as a captain of voracious capitalism and public action, while the Queen embodies the feminine principle, at “Ome” performing her domestic duties. Here, however, the lines take on a completely different significance, at least for those members of the audience who have connected with La Trobe’s attempt at

symbolic suicide. Isa experiences the recording of the traditional rhyme in this way:

“now that the shower had fallen, it was the other voice speaking, the voice that was no one’s voice. And the voice that wept for human pain unending” (126)

The notion that such conventional and, in many ways, oppressive lines from a nursery rhyme, could be read as not part of the symbolic reflection and creation of “human pain” but as voices weeping for and sympathizing with such pain speaks to the dissolution of the patriarchal general text under which such lines have been created and traditionally understood. Here, language itself loses its conventional meaning and undertakes a new meaning; one of pacifism, community, and empathy shared between people, and particularly between La Trobe and some members of the very audience that she has chosen to condemn and, for a time, abandon. Isa’s voices a wish at this time, “O that my life could here have ending” which reflects La Trobe’s experience of “death, death, death,” as Isa appears to wish for the symbolic suicide that La Trobe experiences and which her pageant invokes.⁴² Isa’s conflicted relationship with Giles and towards the patriarchal system in which she participates does not *seem* until this point to allow her an escape, gripped as she is with the view of Giles as “the father of her children” and with those children themselves as one of the central facts of her existence. However, her wish for an ending to her life is not necessarily a wish for her physical demise, but is rather a

wish for a place outside the historical plot outlined by the pageant's depiction of the past. Most importantly, it is a hope for the present depicted here by the lack of plot, by inaction, and by a new language that transforms traditional gender relations into universal sympathy and understanding.

Although, in many ways, the experience of La Trobe and Isa resembles the Lacanian symbolic death that Zizek references, there is at least one crucial difference that is essential to the ethical and political ramifications of the novel. Lacan sees the act of symbolic suicide as a purely individual action, one which affirms the uniqueness of the individual at all costs and "against the community" (J. Lee 130), implying the fundamental isolation of one who jettisons herself from the social symbolic. Certainly La Trobe feels this traumatic isolation when deploying her plotless final Act and wishing to be divorced from her audience, but Isa's connection and response to La Trobe's pageant indicates that even beyond the restrictions and bounds of traditional language and the communally accepted plot, communication and connection, although unlikely, is possible. In fact, this connection between La Trobe, her pageant, and Isa resembles an attempt to access a communal voice that may replace the idea of the controlling, individualist narrator associated with traditional fiction and which La Trobe herself embodies in her earlier efforts to control the pageant completely. The possibility of such

a communal voice is explored by Susan Lanser who notes that one of the purest examples of an attempt to abandon the tradition of individual narration is seen in a book like Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères* in which "the women decide at one point that their own discourse 'denotes an outworn language' and that 'everything must begin over again'" (Lanser 271). This is certainly the possibility explored here by La Trobe and Isa who transform words and phrases from an "outworn language" and invest them with completely different meaning. The joining of the two women in a place outside of patriarchal language, as such, resembles Woolf's hope in *Three Guineas* for a female Society of Outsiders, who despite their status as exiled, independent, and fundamentally other, nevertheless can connect with one another.⁴³

The likelihood of two people transforming the nursery rhyme from one of rigidified gender roles and male domination into one of fundamental human sympathy, community and pacifism is radically unlikely, requiring, as it does, a virtually new language, but the connection Isa has to La Trobe's work offers the possibility of a communal bliss after "all symbolic ties are broken." Likewise, the tradition of an individual narrator, associated with a "hegemonic individualism" (Lanser 255) that emphasizes difference is here undermined in favor of a communal identification. While it is true that, as Lanser points out, *Between the Acts* does not abandon an authorial voice

and narrator in favor of a communal one, the dispersal of voice and the difficulty in identifying individual narrators throughout the novel contributes to the sense of pushing beyond individualism and patriarchal plotting and towards the bliss beyond traditionally defined social relations. Makiko Minow-Pinkney's description of *Between the Acts* as a move towards a "post-individualist future on the other side of the apocalypse brought about by the rapacious male 'I' (193), is then seen most clearly in the connection Isa makes with the pageant following the ten minutes of silence.⁴⁴ It is perhaps here that, despite the undoubted central narratorial presence, *Between the Acts* achieves the goal Woolf set for it in an April 26, 1938 letter in which she describes her novel in progress:

why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; *but "I" rejected: "We" substituted: to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? "We"... composed of many different things ... we all life, all art, all waifs & strays— a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind?"* (*Diary* 5:135; emphasis mine)

In *Between the Acts*, undoubtedly, "we" substitutes for "I" in the narrative sense, and although perhaps a "unified whole" may finally be achieved, it is only after a fundamental dissolution of the unity of plot, both narrative and social, has been enacted, with a new unity being "rambling and capricious," not linear, progressive and tightly unified as in traditional plotting. This unity is a unified voice of Outsiders excluded from

the individualist narration of plot, not a unity achieved through the process of narration itself.⁴⁵

The vision La Trobe has of the present as a break from the past, not as a continuation of it, allows for the possibility not of a continuing patriarchal plot or archi-writing, but as the lack of plot itself, the opportunity for the breaking of symbolic ties, and the forging of a new language outside of patriarchy. Bakhtin argues that the novel form itself fundamentally focuses on the present time, and is thus “a radical response to what is restrictive in tradition” (Ames, “Modernist” 399). Like Bergson, Bakhtin asserts that “The present in all its openendedness, taken as a starting point and center for artistic and ideological orientation, is an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man” (Bakhtin 38).⁴⁶ Although it may be arguable that all novels fulfill this function, Woolf’s focus on the present moment as at least conceivably independent from the past, allows hope for a future that breaks from the restrictive and oppressive plot of the past. That Woolf first elaborates the incredible difficulty of removing oneself from the current archi-writing makes this cautious optimism all the more valuable.

The Pageant and the Present (Take 2)

La Trobe's depiction of the present does not end with the ten minutes of silence, however. As Christopher Ames points out, there are three stages of the final act of La Trobe's pageant. There are the "ten minutes of silence, the actors approaching the audience with fragments of mirrors, and the actors chanting bits and pieces of their earlier lines" ("Modernist" 400). Ames does not include in his list the brief interlude in which a ruined wall is depicted and is then rebuilt by "human effort" (*Between* 126). The wall is rebuilt by "woman handing bricks. [...] black man in fuzzy wig; coffee-coloured ditto in silver turban" taken by Mr. Page, the reporter, to be a signifier of the rebuilding of Civilization by the League of Nations (126). The audience responds approvingly to what they see as a "flattering tribute to ourselves" (127), but in light of what has gone before and what is to follow it is clear that this episode calls for a future dissolution of what is currently "Civilization" and a rebuilding under more egalitarian terms, such that the League of Nations may have represented but certainly did not achieve if the forthcoming war is any indication. That the unity of the rebuilt wall is soon met by more discordance and discontinuity indicates how its "wholeness" is yet another plot, the plot of achievement, civilization, linear progress, and imperialism, that must be interrupted when the music "changed; snapped; broke; jagged" (127).

The interruption of this music is a “cackle, a cacophony!” in which “nothing ended” (127) and is associated with the younger generation “who can’t make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole” (128). Certainly, nothing could be more fundamentally and thematically opposed to the unifying vision of plot and of the wall of Civilization than this music, and its aural discontinuity is soon matched by the arrival of all of the cast members using “anything that’s bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves” (128) to reflect fragments and pieces of the audience, but never a “whole” individual. The choice of fragmentary reflection as a method of depicting the present moment again takes on important historical and ethical significance if read through the lens of Lacanian theory.

Commonplace to Lacanian thought is the idea of the “mirror stage” of childhood development. Lacan argues that the moment that a child first recognizes herself in a mirror is the moment when her “whole” identity is both created and radically undermined. That is, the child here begins to see herself as a complete individual with a coherent and cohesive identity (J. Lee 19), but this is actually the moment when identity is revealed to be “fragile and largely illusory” (J. Lee 23; see Lacan, *Ecrits* 95). The child first begins to see herself as whole by viewing the spatially complete image of herself in the mirror. This view of the self as whole comes despite the young child’s

incapacity to control and coordinate all of her movements. Thus the view of the whole self, coherent and complete, is a false one and creates a fundamental split between the actual self (incoherent, disjointed, and fragmented) and the external self seen in the mirror which appears to be complete and coherent (see *Ecrits: A Selection* 1-7).⁴⁷ Thus our image of our “selves” as coherent and unified is largely a product of a fundamental split in our own identity, and our image of the self is based on an external self that is fundamentally false.

In this context, the attempt by La Trobe and her troupe of actors to present the observing audience with fragmented images of themselves, and disallowing the vision of the self as unified and complete takes on added significance. Although various critics have seen La Trobe as an almost compulsive unifier who seeks perfect harmony in her pageant, following the moment of her symbolic suicide and the ten minutes of silence, she instead encourages others to give up the false unity of their personal plots, the narratives of their own lives that makes them coherent, and instead to acknowledge the fundamentally fragmentary and multiple nature of their identity. “Now Old Bart ... he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose ... There a skirt ... Then trousers only ... Now perhaps a face. ... Ourselves? But that’s cruel. To snap us as we are, before we’ve had time to assume... And only, too, in parts ... That’s what’s so distorting and upsetting and

utterly unfair” (128). From the point of view of various unidentified audience members, the fragmented reflections are “distorting,” but the audience is also upset because the mirrors reflect them “as they are” before they have a chance to “assume” something, perhaps their poses, “plots,” or identities. It is unclear then what is more distorting, the fragmentation or the effort to draw the fragments together into coherence. La Trobe attempts to show each member of the audience their own fundamentally and truthfully divided and fragmented identity, not allowing them the access to the imaginary wholeness of self that they desire.

Woolf’s belief and advocacy of multiple and divided selves goes back at least as far as *The Waves* (1931), which, she claimed in an oft-quoted letter, depicted one self or identity through the deployment of six separate characters and their dramatic monologues. In the novel itself this idea is also forwarded slightly more obliquely: “I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am — Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louis: or how to distinguish my life from theirs,” says Bernard (276). Here the coherent unity of the individual is denied while the foundation of the self is in the external, here in “other people,” or at the very least in the self viewed as other people. The idea of the self as fundamentally “ex-centric” to itself is Woolfian long before it can

be said to be properly Lacanian, but Lacan's overt theorizing helps highlight the political, historical and ethical significance of this idea.⁴⁸

What, then, *does* this extended theorizing upon the nature of individual identity have to do with history, narrative, and ethics as they have been explored in the novel? Here, it is important to draw upon Lacan again, in relation to some of the narrative theorists already explored, Carr in particular. For Lacan, once the self is seen to be fragmented, the crucial means of reconstituting it and providing a sense of wholeness is through the entry into the domain of language, the Symbolic, achieved crucially through the construction of a life narrative. Likewise, it is important that this narrative can never be whole, nor the identity complete, until a narrative is created retrospectively.⁴⁹

In traditional plotting, the conclusion is that which invests identity, the past, or history in its traditionally narrative form with meaning. For this reason, it is significant that "nothing ended" in the discordant music in the closing Act of *Between the Acts*. This lack of an end, leaves the story or history told in the pageant to this point without intelligibility or meaning, as such. Indeed, the introduction of discontinuity and suspended ending seems here to be a concerted attempt to remove or counter the meaning of the pageant's plot, that of the fundamental achievements of patriarchy and imperialism. Likewise, while the imaginary wholeness of the self in the mirror is

fragmented and dissolved through the medium of the mirrors, in *Between the Acts* wholeness is not then reconstituted through the medium of language, as it is in Lacanian theory. Rather, that which was previously seen to be the representation of the unified history of England (if a parodic and double history), the pageant itself, is itself fragmented, exploded, and dis-ordered in the same fashion as the reflection of the audience members. The words of the pageant are presented in random and incoherent order, free from their original context and the signals and markers of traditional narration:

Then once more, in the uproar which by this time has passed quite beyond control, behold Miss Whatsername behind the tree summoned from the bushes — or was it *they* who broke away — Queen Bess; Queen Anne; and the girl in the Mall; and the Age of Reason; and Budge the policeman. Here they came. And the Pilgrims. And the lovers. And the grandfather's clock. And the old man with a beard. They all appeared. What's more, each declaimed some phrase or fragment of their parts ... *I am not* (said one) *in my perfect mind* ... Another, *Reason am I... And I? I'm the old top hat... Home is the hunter, home from the hill* ... [etc.] (128-9; emphasis in original)

So, first the ideal image of the mirror is fragmented and then its replacement, the illusory wholeness of language and narrative, is likewise fragmented. What makes this fragmentation and dis-ordering of the pageant and its language so interesting, however, is that the fragments of speech presented as spoken by the actors are not limited to those previously performed in the pageant, but expand out to additional texts, colloquialisms, rhymes, and phrases, perhaps the most recognizable of which is “*Is that a dagger I see before me*” (129) from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.⁵⁰ Here, again, it becomes clear that

Woolf emphasizes how the pageant is both a repetition and representation of the Derridean general text of the world outside of it, with the words, phrases, colloquialisms, and hegemonic commonplaces of one bleeding into and out of the other. Here, however, plots as such are not merely repeated, but they are re-ordered and transformed from temporally progressive and coherent plots into incoherent, not cohesive fragments that defy the notion of plot by refusing its narratable temporality. If human identity and history itself are understood as constructions that can only be understood through narration as Carr suggests, Woolf argues here that this understanding of them is both factually inaccurate and unethical. La Trobe's final megaphonically enhanced speech to the audience both draws the parallel between human identity and history itself together and emphasizes its continuing ramifications. "*Look at ourselves, ladies and gentleman! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by* (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) *orts, scraps, and fragments like ourselves?*" (131). Here, La Trobe and Woolf question the sense that her audience has of the achievements of civilization. While the audience sees the complete and unified wall of civilization as a representative of the unity, completeness, and, indeed, power of their culture, La Trobe explicitly questions this view of civilization, noting how it is all but impossible that such a unity could be built by

individuals who are as fragmented, discontinuous, and divided as human subjectivity. In fact, it is the distance between the communally assumed unity of both identity and history and the *actual* fragmentation and diversity, that makes the faith in the unified wall of civilization so troublesome and, indeed, delusionary. It is such delusions, predicated on the expunging of those people and ideas that do not fit into the preconceived unity, that makes any actual attempt at social and political universality ungraspable. La Trobe's attempts to show the audience members the discontinuity in their own identity, their own personal narratives, and their own plots are "mirrored" by the discontinuities and fragmentation that she introduces into history and its narrative, and into the general text that exceeds the bounds of her own pageant. It is for this reason that while the audience seems to assume that the wall of unified civilization is already built, La Trobe questions how it can ever be built, questioning, like Kundera, the "idyll" that must be constructed out of such a unified vision, an idyll which excludes and oppresses anyone outside of its unified plot.

The Absence of the Present and Its Presence

In applying Lacanian theories of subjectivity here, I do not wish to subscribe wholeheartedly to what would amount to a Lacanian reading of the novel.⁵¹ Rather, while useful in exploring the ways in which *Between the Acts* rejects a unified theory of

the self and of history in *Between the Acts*, Woolf's final conclusions about history are crucially different from Lacan and from other models of poststructuralism like that of Derrida. Both of these thinkers work rigorously to dissolve the material referentiality of history and subjectivity in their efforts to critique the possibility of a stable identity or ego and to deconstruct hegemonic history. As I emphasized in the introduction, this dissolving of referentiality leaves us on questionable grounds where ethics are concerned and it is here that Woolf's parallelism with Bergson allows her to critique hegemony without abandoning the necessity of material reference.

In this context, it is important to note that although the integration of the Symbolic, achieved through narrative plotting, is essential to the construction of identity in Lacanian thought, it becomes equally important in Lacan's later thought to pass not only from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, but also from the frontier of the Symbolic to the Real. This notion is tied inextricably to temporality. According to Lacan, to come to an understanding of the truth of identity, one must not only construct a narrative of one's life in order to enter the Symbolic, but also, and perhaps more importantly, come to realize the "lack" or emptiness that is at the center of that identity. That is, according to Lacan, while a realization of the self in the Symbolic requires an understanding of one's actions through time, with periodic endings allowing one's life to become intelligible in

the way David Carr suggests, in truth life does not have intelligible beginnings and endings. Likewise it is not possible to distinguish the “presence” of the self, which is only possible in the present moment, as the present is continually passing and is never “present” to us. According to Lacan, “the authentic realization of temporality [...] would recognize the fundamental nothingness of temporality and, thus, the inescapable emptiness, *béance*, gap, or gulf around which the human subject builds a false identity” (J. Lee 81). That is, while identity, achieved through the narratable Symbolic is necessary for healthy Subjectivity, it may be more necessary to bring the analysand, or subject, into a realization of her self’s “radical ex-centricity to itself,” (Lacan, *Ecrits* 171). That is, the subject must realize the impossibility of a whole subject, a complete plot, within a human subject as La Trobe emphasizes at the close of her pageant. So, while narration and plot are necessary to conceive of and identify one’s self, the realization of the truth of the self is the understanding that such a plot is false and that at the center of the subject is emptiness or lack. The moment of this realization, is then potentially the moment of “symbolic suicide,” the removal of oneself from the plot or Symbolic not only of one’s own personal narrative, but from the intersubjective social relations that require a particular type of subjectivity.

Derrida's meditation on time and temporality, "*Ousia and Grammé: Note on a Note from *Being and Time**" explores much of the same territory through a lengthy and difficult discussion of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Derrida's thoughts on the matter conclude, similarly to Lacan, with a disavowal of the possibility of conceiving of presence or a stable subjectivity and existence (Being) through a study of the linguistic similarities and parallels between the temporal present and ontological "presence." His tracing of the impossibility of locating and determining a singular present moment in time, leads him to conclude that Being itself is nonexistent, or at least impossible to identify. As he notes, "Being, the present, the now, substance, essence, are all linked in their meaning to the form of the present participle" (40), and this tying of substance and materiality to something as fleeting as the present moment itself, a moment that is impossible to capture, serves to unmoor substance itself (Being) both in subjectivity and in more general historical materiality from the solidity it claims.⁵² This arbitrary integration of present time and Being removes substance, paradoxically, into the realm purely of the abstract and theoretical as it is impossible in the real world, where time passes. Derrida's lengthy discussion of all of the things both time and presence *cannot* be considered to be concludes with an iteration of the fundamental difference between Being and beings (that is, actual human subjects). He notes how Being in time is, in fact,

impossible, because time erases the possibility of the distinguishable present and therefore presence itself. Like Lacan, Derrida identifies the human being or subject by what it lacks: a coherent, stable, identity and substance.⁵³

Here then we may finally return to the problem of poststructuralism's treatment of history in relationship to ethics. While both Lacan and Derrida see the pervasive, and in many cases oppressive, nature of encompassing symbolic systems or plots, the effort to escape these systems finally results in a dissolution of materiality and substance that leaves ethics itself defined by absence, lack, or the immateriality of Being/existence.

Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts* draws a parallel between the fragmentation of the self to the fragmentation of history, and both are seen as the interruption and disruption of narration. This disruption of narration is, in turn, the disruption of the plots of patriarchy and imperialism. Likewise, Derrida's meditation on time is not merely a metaphysical musing, but is linked specifically, if briefly, to how we are to deal with history, as he notes that any understanding of time must deal with "all the themes that are dependent upon it (and, par excellence, those of *Dasein*, of finitude, of historicity)" (64). If time is proof of the impossibility of presence, then history itself is a tale of non-presence, of lack of substance, of dissipated materiality; that is, it is precisely the opposite of what it claims to be. Through Lacan and Derrida we learn what we learn from *Between the Acts*, the

holes in and dangers of plot itself and the necessity of both identifying and disputing the particular deployment of temporality which gives the illusion of wholeness while misleading and, often, abusing. The removal from plot as such is defined as ethical by Lacan, but is likewise defined by absence or lack, while Derridean thought dissolves the materiality of anything comprised of temporality, including history itself.

This returns us to the problem of ethics raised explicitly by Geras in my introduction. That is, if we cannot say with any certainty what has occurred; if we cannot identify the materiality or ontological existence of anything outside of the plots, archi-writing or Symbolic in which we exist, how can we hope for a modicum of truth or justice. That is, if a removal from these plots is a step purely into lack, *differance*, and unsubstantiality, the material basis for resisting historically-based oppression, based on a defense of truth, is transformed into an abstract theoretical concept defined, paradoxically, by its non-existence. Woolf's novel, however, offers a possible gap in the poststructural dissolution of substance as such, and its concomitant denial of ethics. The poststructural approach to the present and temporality as such seizes strongly upon one half of the Bersonian dialectic defined above, defining time as continually moving, the present as an impossible moment continually passing, and "pure continuity," thus making

presence, substance, and materiality quite impossible, a dead-end or aporia in Derridean terms.

As we saw, however, Bergson also insists upon the concept of the present as substantial and conceivable, as not merely evanescent and fleeting time, but as the intersection of time/consciousness and space/matter. In doing so, he does not reject time as pure continuity but insists that both concepts, pure continuity *and* a material present, must exist simultaneously. In these terms, the dissolution of the Symbolic, the plot, and general text can exist without presence itself being reduced to lack. If narrative is defined by temporality tied together by action, with both a beginning and an end, its dissolution can be achieved not only by a never ending pure continuity without beginning or end, but also and simultaneously by the arresting of time, the conceiving of a “point” an ideal present, not part of the line of narrative (if conceived spatially, as Bergson warns against), but independent and separate from it. In this case, with the possibility of the present and all of its concomitant presence being reinstated, ontological presence must accompany the fragmentation of plot as such. It is for this reason, that La Trobe’s insertion of ten minutes of “unplotted time” is not *purely* characterized by absence or lack, although lack is also there, the “horrifying” lack of participation in accepted social relations. Rather, it is also characterized by the material presence of a “reality too

strong” to be plotted or incorporated into a familiar Symbolic, anti-narrativity itself. It is perhaps enough here to recall that Woolf’s description of moments that exceed the cultural Symbolic, that are filled with life, whether it be horrifying, blissful, or both, are called “moments of *being*,” moments where substantiality and presence are felt most strongly, not moments where identity dissipates either into discourse or its lack. To return to my previous example, when Isa reads the newspaper account of the rape, it is not the story of the rape which captures her attention, nor is it purely the location of the rape as outside of the culturally inscribed “fairy tale” of heroic men, but the *thing itself*, the ontological *presence* of the rape, that makes her feel the event as real and as important, quite possibly, to a resistance that we never see her enact.

Plot’s Return

It is essential, then, to see Woolf’s final novel not merely as a critical double reading of traditional history and its plots, but also as an attempt to theorize matter itself and the importance of accessing the truth itself from the observation of that materiality.⁵⁴

It is only here, the novel suggests, that resistance can begin. The insistence on the possibility of the presence of the present that becomes the basis for ethical resistance is

seen most clearly in the moment following the radical fragmentation and re-ordering of the pageant in the voices of its actors.

It was the cheval glass that proved too heavy. Young Bonthorp for all his muscle couldn't lug the damned thing about any longer. He stopped. So did they all —hand glasses, tin cans, scraps of scullery glass, harness room glass, and heavily embossed silver mirrors —all stopped. And the audience saw themselves not whole by any means, but at any rate sitting still.

The hands of the clock had stopped at the present moment. It was now. Ourselves. (129)

Although certainly in any naturalistic reading of the novel, it would be impossible to say that time actually stops here for the actors and the audience, it is clear that both Woolf and La Trobe wish to give the audience, and the reader, the sensation, and indeed the knowledge, of a moment of the ideal present in which the present itself, in all of its presence, its ontological existence, can be observed and felt with all of its force. That nearly all of the audience cannot confront their own reality, the possibility not only of their fragmented nature but also the weight of their present existence, illustrates the difficulty in jettisoning ourselves from the plots we have adopted and acknowledging that we are not *merely* part of our own stories, but also things that exist, despite our fundamentally fragmented and temporal natures. “All shifted, preened, minced; hands were raised; legs shifted. Even Bart, even Lucy, turned away. All evaded or shaded themselves.” (129). Mrs. Manresa does not turn away, but instead uses the mirrors to

“powder her nose,” not only to deny her fragmented identity, but to “make up” a new one, to construct a whole, a different plot, rather than face herself as the thing itself.

It is important to recall that Bergson and Woolf do not offer the self and history as *purely* the present, substance, or materiality, but rather they offer this ideal present as one half of a dialectic that is irrevocably reduced if we see history and the self as pure continuity or as only absence, lack, or *differance*, all of which deny the oppressive restrictions of plot, but in doing so dissolve the materiality of identity and history itself. It is only through the collision of consciousness and matter that a real freedom, that is, a freedom to act in the real world, can inhabit the present.

Woolf’s incisive and deep probing of the pervasive influence of discourse and social plotting are then balanced, if not undercut, by the tripartite attempt to theorize the present, both as something that can subvert plot and which exists in the most material and substantial way, while it continually passes us by. In this sense, while we may experience life as a plot as David Carr and similar thinkers insist, and while discourse may pervade every corner of our lives as Derrida asserts with his “there is no outside-the-text,” it is possible to seize the present moment as present to us and to remove oneself from the plot of our life and our culture, even if doing so feels like a kind of death. While both Bergson and Bakhtin see the present break from the past as a huge source of

optimism and the possibility of a new beginning, Woolf sees both this and the simultaneously horrifying consequences of removing oneself from the web of social relations and social scripting of established plots. *Between the Acts* is more than a “crazy quilt of discursive and aesthetic forms” (McWhirter 803), it is also an examination of how to remove oneself from that quilt.

Likewise, Woolf sees the immense power of society to transform and recuperate symbolically suicidal acts into its own repetitive plots, despite the individual and/or collective effort to remove oneself. It is for this reason that Judy Little can see the novel both as celebratory of the possibility of regeneration and mournful of the ways that “such regeneration is thwarted by the plot which political and domestic institutions have imposed on the heart and imagination.”(36) It is perhaps for this reason that following the seemingly transformative effects of La Trobe’s symbolically suicidal performance, the connection with Isa, and the attempt to “abandon an outworn language,” Reverend Streatfield, through a retrospective summing up of the pageant, seeks to unify the “scraps, orts, and fragments” La Trobe has presented. It is not only Streatfield, however, that returns the world of Pointz Hall to its usual plots. La Trobe herself reunites her fragmented players and audience by returning to a simple tune, both linear and orderly, like traditional narrative itself:

The tune began; the first note meant a second; the second a third. Then down beneath a force was born in opposition; then another. On different levels they diverged. On different levels ourselves went forward; flower gathering some on the surface; others descending to wrestle with the meaning; but all comprehending; all enlisted. The whole population of the mind's immeasurable profundity came flocking; from the unprotected, the unskinned; and dawn rose; and azure; from chaos and cacophony measure; but not the melody of surface sound alone controlled it; but also the warring battle-plumed warriors straining asunder: To part? No. Compelled from the ends of the horizon; recalled from the edge of appalling crevasses; they crashed; solved; united. (132)

Here, La Trobe, after symbolically halting time itself, departing from the Symbolic, and exploding narrative, winds up the clock of traditional narrative and reforms plot itself, both of her pageant and of the general text outside of it. It is significant that it is not purely the linear, orderly, melody that reunites the pageant and its audience, but the “battle-plumed warriors,” the symbols of patriarchal violence that are necessary to reunite the plot La Trobe has just torn asunder. Here, it is clear that Woolf is aware of the limited political and social force a singular work of art is capable of generating and that, indeed, it takes very little for the “battle-plumed warriors” to reassert their discursive hegemony. Streatfield's speech which follows the pageant's finale merely reemphasizes this fact, in addition to wryly noting the tremendous role capital itself has in the patriarchal plot as Streatfield transforms the entire pageant into a moneymaking venture for the church by passing around the collection baskets. La Trobe continues to

frustrate expectations by mockingly playing “God Save the King,” followed by alternating songs affirming harmony and declaring “dispersed are we.”

Nevertheless, Streatfield’s speech, the passing of the airplanes readying for war, and the resumed cycle of conflict and reconciliation between Giles and Isa suggest that the traditional plots have resumed, that the patriarchal archi-writing remains intact and that while La Trobe can “say to the world. You have taken my gift,” she can simultaneously begin to believe that “her gift meant nothing.” As she notes, the glory of escaping and subverting the plot lasted “for one moment” before passing (145).

La Trobe’s achievement then, it may be noted, is momentary. Likewise, Woolf’s own attempts to not only expose the power and permeation of patriarchal discourse, but also to provide a possible ethics to oppose it, seems to be momentary at best. While the subversion of plot La Trobe offers only seems possible within a controllable environment like an artistic creation, it is worth noting that Woolf has already illustrated the dramatic parallels between the world outside the pageant and that within it, and in doing so has suggested the parallels between the world depicted in her novel and that outside of it. Through this layering of frames, Woolf encourages her readers not only to read the world as a text and to do so ironically and with skepticism as deconstructive thought suggests, but to imagine a different type of text, a different language that may result in peace.

Many have read *Between the Acts* as a final pessimistic resignation to the inexorable progress towards World War II⁵⁵ or as a final statement of the possibility of artistic unity that may protect us from the real world that moves towards this end.⁵⁶ Rather, it is the unity and progress of a particular type of plot that makes World War II seem inevitable. That Woolf can see the possibility, if not the likelihood, of a break in that plot, and that that possibility is not based on an escape into art but on an insistence on the substance and materiality of a different type of history, is a reserved but insistent affirmation of hope.

Notes

¹ Deiman's assertion here is widely quoted by essays concerning the historicity of *Between the Acts*, including Richard S. Lyons's "The Intellectual Structure of *Between the Acts*," originally published in *Modern Language Quarterly* in June 1977 and reprinted in *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessments, Vol. IV* in 1994, where I first discovered it (228). Alex Zwerdling also prominently cites Deiman on the pervasiveness of history in "*Between the Acts* and the Coming of War" (221).

² *Between the Acts* was begun on April 26, 1938, while Woolf was reading proofs for *Three Guineas* on April 11 of the same year. My attention was drawn to this precise dating by Karen Schneider's "Of Two Minds: Woolf, War and *Between the Acts*" (93, n1), although their approximate simultaneity is well known and the two are often discussed in the same context.

³ Although Wells's book bears the same title as that which Lucy reads, there is at least a little critical debate about the source material for this allusion. Although most critics assert that Wells's is the book to which Woolf refers, Patricia Joplin confidently, and enigmatically, asserts, "Though the title of Lucy's book suggests H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*, the actual source of her paraphrase is G. M. Trevelyan's *History of England*" (103, n4). Joplin's assertion is only enigmatic in the sense that she does not provide a clear sense of the source of her confidence in the attribution, whether it is merely based on a closer proximity of subject material or on incontrovertible biographical/textual evidence. I have not uncovered evidence to settle this rather quiet debate, but merely observe that there is some disagreement on the issue, despite the overwhelming assumption by most commentators that Woolf refers to Wells's book.

⁴ Although Eliot's comments in the essay cited are convenient for commentary upon this particular definition of modernism, Eliot's oeuvre is, of course, substantially more complex and contradictory than it would appear from the above outline. In fact, many critics of *Between the Acts* and Eliot's poetry more often point to parallels between them than the disjunction I suggest here. Nevertheless, the contradiction between the essay I cite and Woolf's own practice in *Between the Acts* still stands. For a more substantial comparison of Woolf's novel and Eliot's work, see Richard Lyons's "The Intellectual Structure of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*." Lyons notes the similarity between the treatment of history and time in Eliot's "Little Gidding" and in Woolf's final novel, while also noting Eliot's dependency on pattern and structure where Woolf abandons the possibility of a pattern in history. Weiner Deiman opens his essay on *Between the Acts* with lines from "Little Gidding" which Lyons explores more substantially. Also see Christopher Ames's "The Modernist Canon Narrative" for a discussion of the applicability of "*Ulysses*, Order and Myth" to *Between the Acts* as well as to Joyce's *Ulysses* (399). David McWhirter also notes some similarities between *Between the Acts* and Eliot's "Burnt Norton" (792).

⁵ See the introduction, particularly the final section, "Postmodernist Historical Fiction and Finding the Real," and Chapter Two for more detailed discussions of relativist historiography and its application to this dissertation as a whole.

⁶ Woolf herself makes this point explicitly when discussing novel writing both in *A Room of One's Own* and later in "Women and Fiction." Like many feminists that follow in her wake, Woolf notes how men have always decided what is important enough to represent in art and that traditionally female pursuits are often considered unworthy of artistic consideration. "And as men are the arbiters of that convention as they have established an order of values in life, so too, since fiction is largely based on life, these values prevail there also to a very great extent" ("Women and Fiction" 145). Woolf goes on to assert that it is then no surprise that woman novelists often wish to "alter the established values—to make serious what seems insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important" (146). Perhaps foremost among the things men erroneously value, according to Woolf, is war and violence.

⁷ For an account of Woolf's encounters and disagreements with the younger generation of overtly leftist artists and writers, see Hermione Lee's biography, entitled simply *Virginia Woolf*, particularly Chapters 35-39. Quentin Bell's earlier biography, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, also discusses Woolf's struggle with the demands to be more overtly political, pointing out that most of her direct critics were from the right (2:186), although she was often seen as attenuated and irrelevant by the younger generation of writers on the left (2:185-91).

⁸ In addition to McWhirter, cited above, Mark Hussey reads the novel explicitly in terms of "metafiction," an oft-used near synonym for postmodern fiction, in his " 'I Rejected; We Substituted': Self and Society in *Between the Acts*." Like me, Hussey also discusses Woolf's efforts to dissolve plot and therefore traditional history, although he claims this takes place in the interest of a postmodernist deconstruction of these

traditional forms. I argue both that *Between the Acts* constitutes a deconstruction and attempts to go beyond the limitations of that form of criticism.

⁹ This scene is noted and cited almost universally by critics of the novel, although for different purposes. James Hafly argues, similarly to my own interpretation, that here “there is no longer a difference between the pageant world and the actual world” (187), although, through an application of Bergsonian philosophy, this leads him to an opposite conclusion. Hafly asserts that this moment of dissolution between the boundaries of art and life abolishes the “spatial” past and allows Giles and Isa to gain a kind of existential freedom through an encounter with the present. Although I do not believe this occurs at this point in the novel as Hafly suggests, my own treatment of Bergson illustrates the importance of this concept for interpretation of the novel as a whole.

¹⁰ Although a comprehensive list of such criticism would be impossible, one singular champion of this reading of Woolf’s work is Jane Marcus, whose *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* is a salutary effort in this regard. Marcus has also edited numerous anthologies with this focus, including *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, and *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury: A Centenary Celebration*. In 1987, Eileen Barrett made a useful (if undoubtedly incomplete) list of groundbreaking “feminist” studies of Woolf’s novel in her own essay, “Matriarchal Myth on a Patriarchal Stage.” At the time, she listed, in addition to Marcus’ work, Judy Little’s “Festive Comedy in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*,” Madeline Moore’s *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, Nora Eisenberg’s “Virginia Woolf’s Last Words on Words: *Between the Acts* and ‘Anon,’” and Sallie Sears’ “Theater of War: Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*” (Barrett 36, n2). To say that there has been an explosion of feminist studies of Woolf in general and *Between the Acts* in particular in the fifteen years since Barrett’s article would be a drastic understatement and I cannot begin to undertake a listing of such studies. Some of those that have proved most useful to me are cited throughout the chapter and in the bibliography.

¹¹ The desire of La Trobe to maintain unity and coherence in the pageant is made evident by her own discomfort when such unity is lost. Still, however, to say that her pageant fails because it loses its coherence and unifying vision is a bit simplistic. Indeed, as several critics have noted, despite La Trobe’s discomfort at the loss of control and artistic unity, it does seem to be her goal to at least express, if not to introduce, discontinuity into the village through her pageant. Alex Zwerdling suggests that the pageant is “an attempt by Miss La Trobe to trace the pervasive sense of fragmentation and alienation in the modern world to its historical roots” (“*Between the Acts*” 232), while Christopher Ames, in his “Carnavalesque Comedy in *Between the Acts*,” notes that the whole pageant and the novel itself are devoted to the chronicling of the irresolvable tension between unity and dispersal in both art and life. While I agree with these assessments, I also argue that La Trobe introduces discontinuity into a patriarchal metanarrative in the hopes of introducing a real history that is obscured by it in the majority of the pageant and in traditional historical representation.

¹² See the next section of this chapter for a complete iteration of what is meant here.

¹³ Simon Critchley correctly points out that there are, in fact, two distinct iterations of this principle. “The axial proposition of *Of Grammatology* is ‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ (‘There is no outside-text’) [(*Of Grammatology* 158)] or again, ‘Il n’y a rien hors du texte’ (‘There is nothing outside of the text’) [(*Of Grammatology* 163)] and one should be attentive to the nuanced differences between these two sentences: the first claims that there is no “outside-text,” no text outside, whereas the second claims that there is *nothing* outside the text, that the text outside is nothing, implying by this that any reading that refers to the text to some signified outside textuality is illusory” (Critchley 25). It is the relevance of both poles of this distinction that becomes evident in the body of this chapter.

¹⁴ These de-naturalizing gestures which make both the pageant audience and the novel’s audience look at their own position in relation to social scripting and patriarchal discourse have been explored convincingly several times in terms of Brechtian alienation effects. Among these are Catherine Wiley’s “Making History Unrepeatable,” Herbert Marder’s “Alienation Effects,” and Patricia Klindienst Joplin’s “The Authority of Illusion.”

¹⁵ Such a parallel is most explicitly expressed in Chapter One of *Three Guineas*. In referring to two quotations from two publications banishing women to the house and giving men exclusive purview in the public sphere, Woolf writes, “One is written in English, the other in German. But where is the difference? Are they not both saying the same thing? Are they not both the voices of Dictators, whether they speak English or German, and are we not all agreed that the dictator when we meet him abroad is a very dangerous as well as a very ugly animal?” (53). In fact, Woolf famously asserts that patriarchy is the embryo out of which full-blown fascism grows. “There [...] is the egg of the very same worm that we know under other names in other countries. There we have in embryo the creature, Dictator, as we call him when he is Italian or German, who believes that he has the right, whether given by God, Nature, sex or race is immaterial, to dictate to other human beings how they shall live; what they shall do” (53).

¹⁶ Woolf delineates a credo for women as “outsiders” in England. “‘For,’ the outsider will say, ‘in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world’” (*Three Guineas* 109). In this, Woolf tries to encourage women to separate themselves from the network of discourses and ideologies that make England a patriarchal nation and therefore one predicated upon violence and domination. She refutes the English assertion that they are “superior to the men of other countries” (108), paralleling it to the similar assertions made concurrently by the Germans, again as a rationale for violence and imperial expansion. For Woolf, nationalism itself is a patriarchal idea, bound inextricably to ideas like violence and enslavement. Woolf establishes women as “outsiders” by counting them among the enslaved as opposed to the enslavers, “Our country [...] throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share of its possessions” (108). Despite the rhetorical power of this statement, it is fair to note that the comparison of women, and Woolf herself, to slaves may stretch the comparison beyond its rhetorical usefulness. Woolf’s critique of patriarchy is more than valid but the

comparison of herself with slaves contributes to the sense of Woolf's lesser sensitivity to issues of class and race, as her own freedom and even power within the broader culture can hardly be compared with the objectification of slaves.

¹⁷ A similar point is made symbolically through the geographical commentary in *Figgis's Guide Book* (1833). "The Guide Book still told the truth. 1833 was true in 1939" (41). The continuity between the two eras is here emphasized as it is in Lucy's comments.

¹⁸ This reflects the kind of Zizekian ideological fantasy described in Chapter Two, see note 12 (also see Zizek, *Sublime Object* 33).

¹⁹ The other possible cause and derivation of such unavoidable repetition is the possibility of a primitive, natural, and/or essential nature to the roles played by men and women. Woolf's invocation of primitive societies and behaviors in Lucy's daydreams of prehistoric London and La Trobe's vision of her next pageant lend credence to this point of view, commented on quite copiously elsewhere. Jane Marcus expresses this view paradigmatically in "Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny," wherein she writes, "*The Years* asks the question, Is there a pattern? and *Between the Acts* gives a sociobiological answer. The origin of aggression, war, and oppression is in the origin of the species, in the drama of the battle of sexes. Isa and Giles fight like the dog, fox and the vixen before they make love" (77). However, the complicated deployment of narrative frames in the novel suggests that these supposedly primitive and natural repetitions are actually creations and constructions, repeated because of the power of the general text or symbolic power of culture at least as much, if not more so, than some biological imperative.

²⁰ See the introduction and, particularly, Chapter Two for a more extensive analysis of White's "postmodern" historiography.

²¹ The choice of Whitehall here is significant as, as Rachel Blau Du Plessis points out, "Whitehall is a synecdoche for British civil service and administrative agreements that endure beyond changes in specific governments, and thus is a metaphor for broad sociocultural agreement" (39). That is, it is a virtual synonym for hegemony itself, and particularly British patriarchal hegemony. That the rape occurs here indicates the important parallels between physical rape and social and cultural domination.

²² Although at some points in *Three Guineas*, Woolf seems to naively value the newspaper's ability to present the truth of present history, as is usually the case, Woolf's position is somewhat more complex and ambiguous. Most importantly, Woolf shows a typical shrewdness in noting the incursion of ideology onto any kind of transparent reportage when she notes that every newspaper "is financed by a board [...] each board has a policy [...] each board employs writers to expound that policy" (*Three Guineas* 95). She further observes that if one is to get "the facts" as such, then obtaining at least three newspapers is necessary in order to "compare at least three different versions of the same fact, and come in the end to your own conclusion" (95). Although Woolf here displays a typically modernist perspectivism, she also holds onto the important distinction between fact and fiction, closing her discussion of the newspaper with, "Now that we

have discussed, very briefly, what may be called the literature of fact, let us turn to what may be called the literature of fiction” (95).

²³ Think, for instance, of the photograph of Clementis in Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* as discussed in the introduction.

²⁴ It is important to note that Carr is not alone in his view of the comparison of narrative and reality” but that I use him here as an exemplary instance of this type of thinking. Carr is one of the most prolific defenders of this point of view, but he himself points to several predecessors. Chief among these is Barbara Hardy, particularly in “Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach Through Narrative.”

²⁵ He points to such finite actions as a tennis match, set and point and to how each of these segments can be said to begin, move through a middle, and conclude and also that each of these actions is predicted and experienced as a mini-narrative by the participants.

²⁶ See the introduction and particularly Chapter Two for further exploration of the relationship between narrative and plot.

²⁷ See Richardson, *Narrative Dynamics* 56-62 for a brief, but useful, overview.

²⁸ This is not peculiar to Woolf or to *Between the Acts*, of course, as much modernist work is dedicated to the minutia and “unimportant details” of existence, many of which could not be said to contribute to a unified plot centered around great actions. Still, the continually interrupted delivery of *Between the Acts* along with the intense difficulty of locating particular narrators, even after multiple readings, makes it an exemplary model of this anti-narrative strain. In addition, Woolf’s concentration on history *as* narrative makes it ideal for exploring the difficulty of accessing a real outside of textuality. Another reading of this passage might lead us to identify this “static” with a Barthesian “reality-effect,” gathering various background description and information in order to give the world of the novel the sense of the real world. Nevertheless, the absence of a clear narrative voice to describe this world to the reader, and the disjunction and disconnection between realistic details, leaves Woolf’s novel far from the typical realistic novel that Barthes discusses. Balzac’s *Sarrasine* is, of course, his paradigmatic example in *S/Z*.

²⁹ Friedman’s “Lyric Subversions of Narrative in Women’s Writing: Virginia Woolf and the Tyranny of Plot,” is useful in sketching the connection between anti-narrativism, lyricism, and pre-Oedipal modes of narration in Woolf. As Friedman and Honor McKittrick Wallace both explain, psychoanalytic models of masculine desire are based on the concept of a male infant’s initial desire for the mother, which is then redirected towards substitute objects, none of which can ever completely substitute for the mother. This, in turn, leads to a desire that can never be completely satisfied, but which is forever delayed, consummated, re-situated and pursued anew. This is then reflected in narratives that are consistently modeled on “tumescence and detumescence, [...] tension and resolution, [...] intensification to the point of climax and consummation.

In the sophisticated forms of fiction, as in the sophisticated practice of sex, much of the art consists of delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself” (Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* 26). Barthes’s *Pleasure of the Text* and Robert Scholes’s *Fabulation and Metafiction*, as well as Peter Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot* are paradigmatic examples of this analogization of narrative and masculine sexual desire. For a further explanation of the male model of Oedipal desire, particularly via Brooks, see Chapter Two of the present study. The pre-Oedipal focus of lyric, as discussed by Friedman and Wallace posits a feminine desire for the mother, that is not necessarily interrupted or foreclosed as it is in the Oedipal scenario, postulating a pre-lapsarian Edenic timeless and never-ending moment wherein the love of the mother is always present and paradisiacal. This model rejects the notion that all desire must mimic masculine Oedipal progression as offered by Freud and suggests an alternative to narrative itself in the lyrical achievement of union with the mother. As Friedman notes, “Lyric moments in a text [...] may encode an unbounded, boundless desire for a timeless union with the mother, while the linear progression of the narrative may invoke the child’s separation from the mother and initiation into the world and law of the father (165). As both Friedman and Wallace observe, Kristeva’s semiotic register reflects this vision of the lyric, as opposed to her symbolic, which reflects the post-lapsarian entry into the Oedipal triangle. While some, like Friedman, see Woolf’s reliance on the lyric as a statement of feminism versus male-dominated traditional plot, others, like Wallace are less convinced, noting how an over-reliance on lyricism does not allow for entry into the social world as it currently exists, avoiding the material and political agenda of real-world feminism. Particularly interesting as a counter-text to critics interested in lyricism as opposed to Oedipal desire is Elizabeth Abel’s “Narrative Structure(s) and Female Development” which discusses the importance of an alternative female sexual development as differentiated from the male Oedipal triangle. As Abel discusses (100), according to Freud women must displace their desires first from mother to father, and then to a father substitute, foreclosing what may be a more natural female/female desire. Through a discussion of the Sally Seton/Clarissa relationship in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Abel is able to indicate how a narrative reflective of female sexual development is likely to differ from that based on a masculine development, without merely relying on a pre-narrative lyrical unity with the mother. Rachel Blau Du Plessis also thoroughly discusses the feminist implications of revising the male plot in her *Writing Beyond the Ending*, although she is less interested in the connection to psychoanalysis and readerly desire. For a general discussion of female lyricism as an alternative mode of desire that contrasts a masculine Oedipal narrativism see Wallace “Desire and the Female Protagonist: A Critique of Feminist Narrative Theory.” Teresa De Laurentis also provides an interesting discussion of the Oedipal origins of narrative desire in *Alice Doesn’t*, but, like Abel, suggests an alternative to the turn to pre-Oedipal lyricism, suggesting instead a double and contradictory Oedipalism that reveals Oedipal desire’s own contradictions. See particularly Chapter Five, “Desire in Narrative.” For additional discussion of some alternative female models of narrative, and anti-narrative, desire, and their implications for historical referentiality, see Chapter Two of the present work.

³⁰ For a more in-depth discussion of narrative as the uncovering of gothic secrets, see Chapter Two.

³¹ Here again, it is important to note the lily pool's congeniality with the timeless and pre-lapsarian paradise associated with lyricism (see note 29 above and 56 below). It is also important to note how lyric fails, in this instance, to provide a complete antidote or counter to narrative, as plot is able to incorporate and deploy the lily pool as part of its talk-producing elements of narrative desire, transforming the eternal lily pool into a locale for the story of foreclosed desire that leads to the lady's suicide in the pool.

³² For useful overviews of Bergsonian philosophy see Leszek Kolakowski's *Bergson*, John Mullarkey's *Bergson and Philosophy*, and Giles Deleuze's *Bergsonism*. Also see the recent collection, *Key Writings* and its introduction by Mullarkey and Keith Ansell Pearson (1-45). I focus on *Matter and Memory* for my reading of Bergson while acknowledging the fact that Bergson dealt with the same philosophical issues throughout his career and that some changes enter his thinking about both matter and memory in his later work. Nevertheless, the primary claims I make here about his thought remain largely true over the development of his work. Fundamentally, the dual nature of existence as both matter *and* memory/consciousness is central to Bergson throughout his career, as is the important connection between the present and free will."

³³ To reverse the dichotomy yet again, however, Bergson refuses to allow the matter that is the brain final say over the state of consciousness that is memory. In fact, Bergson allows that the brain and memory/consciousness are integrally related, but the latter is *not* generated completely by the former. Rather:

That there is close connection between a state of consciousness and the brain we do not dispute. But there is also a close connection between a coat and the nail on which it hangs, for, if the nail is pulled out, the coat falls to the ground. Shall we say, then, that the shape of the nail gives us the shape of the coat, or in any way corresponds to it? No more are we entitled to conclude, because the physical fact is hung onto a cerebral state, that there is any parallelism between the two series psychical and physiological. (*Matter and Memory* 12)

³⁴ Although Bergson refutes the notion that his philosophy allows for two almost incompatible worlds in the first page of *Matter and Memory*, it is nonetheless a common accusation of critics. Nevertheless, the primary aim of *Matter and Memory*, as Bergson describes it is, "to show that realism and idealism both go too far, that it is a mistake to reduce matter to the perception we have of it, a mistake also to make of it a thing able to produce in us perceptions, but in itself of another nature than they (*Matter and Memory* 9; my emphasis). That is, they are *not* of fundamentally separate natures, although they may appear to be. In making them of the same nature, Bergson famously reverses the starting point of most philosophies of time. That is, most philosophies begin by assuming inert matter to be the fundamental object of inquiry with time's "motion" being added to them. Bergson declares "motion" itself to be the fundamental ingredient of existence with the "ideal present" moment of matter being not merely the present itself, but rather, as Deleuze puts it "*only the most contracted level of the past*" (74; emphasis in original).

³⁵This metaphor of transformation of matter into memory is, admittedly, my own, and as such may not have some of the rigorous applicability the discipline of philosophy demands. It seems, however, appropriate enough in explaining the importance of the present to Bergson, and to Woolf. Likewise, because for Bergson, “pure memory” is that which retains *all* of the past, as such, it is as Deleuze suggests, ontology itself, even if it is never accessible in all of its capacity to consciousness. Again, it is only in the present that the ontology of the pure past meets the materiality of matter itself. “Only the present is ‘psychological’; but the past is pure ontology; pure recollection has only ontological significance” (Deleuze 56)

³⁶It is this element that is underplayed in the somewhat similar reading of Woolf via Bergson provided by James Hafly in “A Reading of *Between the Acts*.” Hafly discusses the Bergsonian contention that freedom is exercised when “clock time” is transformed into “durée” or “mind time” and that where space is determinable, time is not, and therefore only “an act motivated by and in pure time perception is undetermined or free” (185). In this, he quotes Bergson, who argues, “consciousness is synonymous with invention and with freedom” (qtd. in Hafly 185). Although this is accurate as far as it goes, Bergson’s crucial move is the *bringing together* of the freedom of consciousness and time with the world of matter, not the separation, which Hafly maintains. It is the possibility of the “free act” of consciousness and movement within space and matter, only achievable in the present, which makes Bergson’s difficult philosophy applicable to the “real world” of ethics and politics that Woolf explores in *Between the Acts*.

³⁷As Schulkind notes, this kind of moment of vision is a commonplace of religion, and many readers take Lucy Swithin’s religiosity in *Between the Acts* as either indicative of a newfound spiritualism in Woolf, or as a condemnation of such religiosity. My own reading sees these moments as more crucial to the material than the metaphysical.

³⁸See Zwerdling, in particular, for this type of reading.

³⁹Here, it is important to note a crucial difference between Woolf’s thought and Bergson’s. While Bergson says it is only the present which moves him and concerns him, the past being, in a sense, no longer existent, Woolf tends to linger on the past, in this case working hard to identify those rare past moments, once present, that have realized their potential for freedom.

⁴⁰I admit here to being only passingly familiar with the Rossellini film and choose not to engage with the possible distance between Zizek’s reading and the evidence of the film itself. Rather, I use Zizek’s reading of this example to illustrate the relevance of the idea of “symbolic suicide” to Woolf’s novel. The model for this reading is, of course, *Antigone*, who Woolf herself references in her choice of passivity and a Society of Outsiders in *Three Guineas* (18). The importance of Woolf’s affiliation with Antigone is noted by DiBattista (193) and by Wiley (5). Wiley writes, “Like the Greek heroine, Woolf understands that, until the law of the father in all its dimensions is fundamentally challenged, women, and by extension the majority of people who are powerless, will continue to suffer under it. But offering readers a newer, stronger, ‘improved,’ version of

the feminine is not enough to crack the mirror holding women to men's normative vision. Nor is cracking the mirror sufficient, for once women have understood their representation to be a lie, they must create a different, more truthful one" (Wiley 5). Much of this chapter is devoted to explaining how Woolf both cracks the mirror of male representation and attempts to establish the parameters for a more accurate truth than has been achieved in traditional historical representation.

⁴¹ While I do wish to stress the potential freedom and agency conferred in an act of symbolic suicide as taken by La Trobe, it is worth noting that such an act cannot be taken unless one has a certain level of subjectivity and agency already within the society of which one is a part. La Trobe can jettison herself from social relations precisely because she is a part of them, even if she is a marginal and generally shunned part of that community. She does have the power and the status to stage her yearly pageant, a certain degree of money, middle-class status, etc. If she were already "object" in terms of the larger society, or was regarded by others and herself as an object or tool, as many are, she would not have the ability or the capacity to perform her act of suicide. As such, there is a limit to the amount of power and agency such an act confers. Woolf's own status as well-off middle class woman puts her in a similar position (see note 16).

⁴² In addition to the readings of the pageant, and this moment in particular, as Brechtian (see note 14) a particularly interesting reading of La Trobe's presentation of the present is made by Sallie Sears in "Theater of War: Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*" in which she compares this segment of the pageant to a sixties "happening" designed to shock the audience for "therapeutic or terroristic ends" (227). Sears' conclusion that La Trobe fails is antithetical to my own reading of the event as a momentarily successful present that creates a communal voice, particularly between La Trobe and Isa. Still, her identification of this moment as a "plotless performance," (226) also similar to a "happening" is congenial to my own.

⁴³ There have been several readings of *Between the Acts* as embodying a new language of sorts, although none, to my mind, satisfactorily identify the thematic and social significance of this new language. Perhaps the most effective in surveying the contours of the linguistic experimentation undertaken is Christopher Ames's "Carnavalesque Comedy in *Between the Acts*" which refers to the language of *Between the Acts* as the "ur-language of imitative sound," suggesting, to a degree, that the language of the novel hearkens back to a pre-symbolic, prelapsarian past. Here, on the other hand, I regard the language as post-symbolic, more akin to the "Real" than to the pre-symbolic "Imaginary" in Lacanian terms. Nevertheless, Ames does a salutary job of collecting the large number of neologisms and composites that populate the novel (403) and closes by looking at what he calls an "astonishing passage" reminiscent of the linguistic inventiveness of *Finnegan's Wake*:

What a jangle and a jingle! Well, with the means at her disposal, you can't ask too much. What a cackle, a cacophony! Nothing ended. So abrupt. And corrupt. Such an outrage; such an insult. And not plain. Very up to date, all the same. What is her game? To disrupt? Jog and trot? Jerk and smirk? Put the finger to the nose? Squint and pry? Peak and

spry? O the irreverence of the generation which is only momentarily — thanks be— ‘the young.’ The young, who can’t make, but only break; shiver into splinters the old vision; smash to atoms what was whole. What a cackle, what a rattle, what a yaffle—as they call the woodpecker, the laughing bird that flits from tree to tree. (qtd. in Ames, “Carnavalesque Comedy” 407; Woolf, *Between the Acts* 127)

While Ames finds all of this wordplay to be “delightfully silly” and a representative of the comic spirit that shines through the novel as a whole, I contend that while this may be true, this has a crucial symbolic significance in the novel’s attempt to resist plot and the incursion of the symbolic and to, instead, invent a new language in a present that constitutes a moment of freedom. For other readings of the novel that focus on its innovations with words and language see Marilyn Brownstein’s “Postmodern Language and the Perpetuation of Desire,” Nora Eisenberg’s “Virginia Woolf’s Last Words on Words: *Between the Acts* and ‘Anon,’” and Julie Vandivere’s “Waves and Fragments: Linguistic Construction as Subject Formation in Virginia Woolf.”

⁴⁴ This line is also quoted by Lanser in her brief discussion of *Between the Acts* in *Fictions of Authority* (118-19).

⁴⁵ Several critics of the novel note the importance of the passage from Woolf’s diaries. In particular, Marc Hussey in “‘I Rejected, We Substituted’: The Self and Society in *Between the Acts*” reads both the novel and the letter as moments of deconstruction of the boundaries between the self conceived as individual and the society as a whole. He does not, however, note how this plays out in the functioning of the narrative voice of the novel, although he does briefly explore its ramifications for the reading of history (248-49, n8). Other critics who discuss this passage include Joplin (91), Watkins (358), DiBattista (221) and Zwerdling (226). The latter of these notes how Giles rejects the possibility of unity between people and reads this as a pessimistic view by the novel and by Woolf. To ascribe Giles’s views to Woolf seems to be an inordinate leap to take here considering the general depiction of Giles. It is worth mentioning that in one of the most influential feminist essays on *Between the Acts*, Jane Marcus’s “Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny,” Marcus reads the entire novel, paradoxically largely through a reading of a related myth rather than a close reading of the novel itself, as an articulation of female/female connection as I see occurring here between Miss La Trobe and Isa. More specifically, however, Lucio P. Ruotolo’s reading of the novel in *The Interrupted Moment* is an important precedent for my own. Ruotolo notes that La Trobe consciously denies “her own voice conclusiveness” despite her own need for unity and the inundation of rain “unites her further with the audience and more immediately with Isa” (226-27). While my own argument is that La Trobe and Isa are united in a way that is perhaps exclusive of the “audience as a whole” and particularly of the larger patriarchal culture, Ruotolo nicely identifies the importance of this moment. Likewise, Ruotolo notes the tendency for Woolf to be attracted to moments of unity throughout her work (whether narrative or lyric), but to also insistently “interrupt” those moments in a somewhat anarchic spirit, refusing the comfort and wholeness such moments allow. My own reading agrees with this assessment of Woolf, while expanding it and contextualizing it within the fields of postmodern history and poststructural theory.

Ruotolo's assessment of Woolf's work as anarchic is sympathetic to my own, in particular with the notion of "symbolic suicide" which refuses the cultural plot as currently situated. Ruotolo's link of Woolf to existential thought is also somewhat congenial to my own appropriation of the freedom of the Bergsonian present. For Ruotolo's overview of Woolf's work and *Between the Acts* in particular, see the introduction to *The Interrupted Moment*, as well as his chapter on *Between the Acts* (1-18, 205-30).

⁴⁶ This passage was brought to my attention in relation to Woolf's novel by Christopher Ames's, "The Modernist Canon Narrative" and is also quoted there (399-400).

⁴⁷ I owe much of my own understanding of Lacan's argument to the more straightforwardly and helpfully worded Twayne's series book *Jacques Lacan* by Jonathan Scott Lee.

⁴⁸ Certainly, other interpretive paradigms may be just as useful in illustrating the significance of the fragmenting mirrors. Strikingly innovative in her approach to this scene is Evelyn Haller in her "Isis Unveiled: Virginia Woolf's Use of Egyptian Myth." Haller notes the similarity between the scene at Pointz Hall and the "mirror dance" next to the Nile in ancient Egypt. Her conclusions, however, radically differ from my own. Haller's assertion that Woolf's use of Egyptian myth provides an Eliotic ordering myth that creates a whole out of fragments, particularly unified by the Egyptian focus on death. Rather, while the Egyptian mythography may be influential, I believe the fragmenting mirrors to be an important signifier of the breaking of false unified plots (and selves), not a means to further a mythographic unity.

⁴⁹ Again, according to Lacanian thought, while the "whole" image in the mirror is an initial way that human subjects conceive of themselves as complete and unified individuals, it is soon abandoned with the realization of the distance between the actual self and the ideal unity in the mirror. Once this idea is abandoned (or at the very least, undermined), it is only the entry into the communal domain of language itself (the Symbolic in Lacanian terms) that the subject can unify herself (see J. Lee 20, 31-71) through the use of the term "I." It is the job of psychoanalysis to bring the patient attached to "imaginary" ideal images of themselves properly into the Symbolic by allowing him to transform statements describing himself from "empty speech" into "full speech" or into a "intersubjectively intelligible narration of his past" (J. Lee 42). That is, the dialogue between the analyst and analysand need not necessarily capture the past with factual accuracy, but it must convert the fragmented and alienated identity into a coherent and *narratable* story, capable of being shared with another, bringing the analysand into an intersubjective community and out of the narcissistic identification with the Imaginary ideal self. Crucial here is the point that "healthy" self-construction has little or nothing to do with an accurate "recovery" of the lost past, but has everything to do with the transformation of the self into "narrative." While I will discuss this idea more thoroughly in the next chapter, here it is useful to revisit the Lacanian form of this postulate: "I might as well be categorical: in psychoanalytic anamnesis, it is not a question of reality, but of truth, because the effect of full speech is to reorder past contingencies by conferring on

them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the little freedom through which the subject makes them present” (qtd. in J. Lee 45; see *Ecrits* 247-48). Lacan here notes how our truth, or reality, is constructed retrospectively, from the end of the narrative, giving meaning to “past contingencies” and ordering them into a coherent self. This can only be achieved, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, through the analyst providing “punctuation” or various endings to the analysand’s narrative as it unfolds. This is because narrative’s meaning is determined by its conclusion (a theory advocated by Freud and narrative theorists using a Freudian model, like Peter Brooks, as I discuss in Chapter Two), and an analysand’s free association will always be without an ending, unless the analysand “punctuates” the narrative with “breaks— such as a carefully phrased question, an appropriately significant cough, or the end of a session— which have the effect of conferring meaning on the analysand’s discourse” (J. Lee 40; see *Ecrits* 243).

⁵⁰ *Macbeth* is, of course, another play that features a mirror presented to the audience.

⁵¹ For a more traditionally Lacanian reading of the novel, see Marilyn Brownstein’s “Postmodern Language and the Perpetuation of Desire.”

⁵² As Derrida notes, it is for this reason that thinkers like Hegel have tried to remove the idea of “presence” *from* the idea of the temporal “now” and to place it in an “Eternal” realm outside of time itself, but as Derrida points out this presents the problematic that “Being is nontime, time is nonbeing insofar as being already, secretly has been determined as present, and beingness (*ousia*) as presence” (“*Ousia and Grammé*” 51).

⁵³ Interestingly, the abandonment of the narrative self constructed in the Symbolic in favor of a subject defined by its “ex-centricity” in Lacanian terms, or by being’s *differance* from Being, as such, in Derridean terms, denies the possibility of a “whole” healthy subject, rendering psychoanalysis’s purpose open to radical question. Jonathan Scott Lee phrases this problem usefully: “If psychoanalysis is not essentially therapeutic [...] is not guaranteed to be a cure for [the analysand’s] suffering, then what exactly is psychoanalysis doing?” (J. Lee 97). Lacan’s response to this question (although elliptical as usual) is that psychoanalysis is “an ethical discipline” and “that the analysand emerges as a responsible, ethical agent, that is, as a fully human being” (J. Lee 97). The content of this ethics, it appears, is the result of the “symbolic suicide” detailed above, the jettisoning of oneself from social relations, social “plots,” and both Imaginary and Symbolic identifications to occupy a space that is purely individual. For Derrida, this space seems to be occupied automatically, that is *differance* is an inherent part of existence, but for Lacan it constitutes an ethical behavior.

⁵⁴ I am not unaware of Woolf’s antagonism in “Modern Fiction” and elsewhere towards those authors who she calls “materialists,” concentrating excessively on the daily business of government and politics. This reading does not deny that Woolf, but rather looks at the Woolf who also insists that a complete abandonment of materialism is equally dangerous.

⁵⁵In particular, Alex Zwerdling's "*Between the Acts* and the Coming of War," is the most persuasive of this type of reading.

⁵⁶Examples of the more optimistic reading of *Between the Acts* often focus on its status as "comedy" which provides a final unity that resolves the very deep and insistent conflicts and chaos that characterize the novel. Often, this is accomplished by noting the novel's treatment of the peasant villagers and common people in the pageant who continue their work of "digging and delving" despite the "historical" change that occurs around them. The continuity between these peasants and the villagers in the present day provides a source of festive continuity and unity according to readings like those of Maria DiBattista, Judy Little, and Eileen Barrett. See, in particular, DiBattista's reading which notes the rejection of plot and teleology in favor of "underlying generative rhythms" that are transhistorical (209). Although this line of analysis does not fit into the purview of this chapter, the relationship between the continuity of "common" or village life as a constituent of a non-narrative real is taken up in Chapter Two in my discussion of Graham Swift's *Waterland*. Certainly Woolf juxtaposes the circular and repetitive actions of the villagers to the purported progress of imperialism and patriarchy, but I do not see this as a significant part of the feminist anti-narrational ethics constructed in the novel as a counter to the plot of patriarchy. I read these readings of *Between the Acts* as allied to a notion of lyricism that places the festive comedy and foregrounding of the peasant villagers as a prelapsarian world that both pre-exists and counters the patriarchal history built upon narratives of Oedipal desire (see note 29). Indeed, Maria DiBattista argues that "Peace is [...] the emotion generated by the antidramatic, lyrical content of *Between the Acts*, the emotion that transports the mind of child, laborer, even of the dead, beyond the spectacle of its own history into the darker regions of another inhuman world [...] a world represented by the lily pool" (231). While DiBattista's reading does not examine the link of lyric to pre-Oedipal desire for the mother (again, see note 29) her identification here of the importance of lyric reveals the problems with these readings. While these moments do provide nonnarratable moments of unity, they do so in a hearkening for a pre-lapsarian past that cannot be revisited. While there is some display of nostalgia for such moments of unity in the novel, the ethical thrust of the novel is not towards losing oneself in a pre-narrative paradise, but in pushing beyond the current patriarchal plots and languages towards a place beyond the Symbolic and a realization both of its inconsistencies and of the moments of material reality that allow us to see a world beyond patriarchal plot. In this way, a focus on the lyricism of the lily pool, the lady's picture, etc. seem less important than a focus on the final act of the pageant. Barrett sees the fragmentation in the mirror as a mockery of the "search for truth," citing the lily pool as the true place for meditative reflection (30). I am inclined to reverse their importance, with the lily pool occupying a place of lyric but static paradise and because static, ethically and politically paralyzed. On the other hand, the moment of the fragmentation of the mirrors is the possibility of shocking the viewers into seeing the real and therefore the truth.

Chapter Two

“The Swamps of Myth...and Empirical Fishing Lines”: Historiography, Narrativity, and the “Here and Now” in Graham Swift’s *Waterland*

In *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf enacts an assault on plot and advocates an access to the materiality of the past achieved through a theorization of the present. In this critique of narrative form and its crippling effect not only upon the accuracy of historical representation but also its ideology, Woolf’s work foresees contemporary debates over narrativist historiography and the ethics of poststructuralism while preceding them by several decades. As such, any discussion of that novel’s connection to postmodernism happens retrospectively, through a critical lens provided by our present. Written some forty years later, Graham Swift’s *Waterland* not only tackles the same issues but is clearly conscious of the academic debate over relativist historiography. In fact, despite its status as fiction, *Waterland* has been almost inevitably discussed, as it is here, within the context of relativist historiography and particularly Hayden White’s theorization of history.

Set in the East-Anglian fens over the past 250 years as well as in contemporary London, *Waterland* focuses on the struggle of Thomas Crick, a history professor, to come to grips not only with his own sordid personal history, but also with his family history, England’s national decline, and the ontological status of “history” itself. Like *Between*

the Acts then, the novel is obsessed with history and explores it in all of its various forms.

Crick stresses the similarity between the historical narrative that links important personages and events together through narration and the “fairy-tales” his family has been telling for years to overcome the boredom of living in the topographically and narratively flat Fens. In this he resembles the postmodernist historian who blurs the distinctions between fiction and history, stressing their similarities instead of their differences.

The novel opens innocuously with a dictionary entry for “*Historia*” that defines history as: “1). inquiry, investigation, learning, 2). a.) a narrative of past events, history or b.) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story.” While these definitions seem to begin with a practicing historian’s search for material accuracy, the inquiry into the past, they end with the assertion that there is no substantial difference between a story and a history. This assertion is supported by one of Crick’s students who mockingly asserts that history itself is a fairy tale, that it never really happened. When the insubordinate student, Price¹ objects to one of Crick’s more subtle points of historical theory, he sounds nothing so much as a materialist historian responding to the overly theoretical and seemingly impractical viewpoint of a postmodern historian like White, Ankersmit, Kellner, et. al. When Crick declares “the more you try to dissect events, the more you lose hold of

them— the more they seem to have occurred largely in people’s imagination,” (140) he echoes White’s contention that there are no stories, as such, found in the past and that they are rather imagined and constructed later by historians and their readers struggling to understand incomprehensible events. Likewise, when Price sarcastically replies: “Should we be writing this down sir? The French Revolution never happened. It only happened in the imagination?” (140) he sounds like the voice of materialist reason, puncturing theoretical relativism with the necessity of the retention of hard facts.

This debate between teacher and student is importantly not conducted in an apolitical theoretical context, but against the political and social backdrop of the rights of the people and the oppression of the working class that undergirds the class’s discussion of the French Revolution. While Crick speculates about the semiological slippage involved in the popular statement “Vox populi, vox Dei” (“the voice of the people is the voice of God”) (139) noting how difficult it can be to find a referent behind the signifier, “the people,” Price instead insists on the possibility of identifying those people in order to create a political affiliation with them. In this, Price resembles not only materialist historians, but also a Marxist historian like Bryan Palmer who advocates a retention of the material category of history precisely for a radical Marxist agenda. While Crick and Price play out the drama of authority/aristocrat and rebel/people on the micro-scale of the

classroom,² the struggle calls to mind the “six thousand corpses (in the streets of Paris alone) [...] not to mention the thousands of corpses in greater France or the unnumbered corpses of Italians, Austrians, Prussians, Russians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Englishmen — which were to be strewn over the battlegrounds of Europe” (141) since the revolution. Here Price and the novel itself foreground the materiality of history and the potential pitfalls in dismissing it to the realm of discourse and textuality by pointing to the real human suffering that can be effaced if this occurs.

Although an opposing viewpoint is clearly voiced by Price, because of Crick’s status as the central narrator of the novel and because of his propensity to point to the narratable elements of history and its similarity to stories and fairy-tales, Swift’s novel has consistently been interpreted as not only a discussion of postmodernist historiography, but as an advocate of its principles. Focusing on the novel’s exploration of the aporia of historical explanation and the limits of signification to represent the real, Robert K. Irish compares Crick’s historiography to that of Hayden White and configures the novel as an exploration of the tantalizing narrative “desire” created by the novel and its continual frustration. Likewise, in a recent study of the novel, Pamela Cooper has identified *Waterland* as a Baudrillardian simulacrum of realistic history, which deconstructs notions of presence, teleology, and referentiality present in traditional

histories: “*Waterland*—by refiguring and re-presenting history, fiction and the history of fiction—draws to itself all the vertiginous seductive power of the simulacrum” (375). Baudrillard’s simulacrum is characterized by its obliteration of the notion of the real, which is always, in the postmodern age merely a reproduction of itself, a representation with no referent. Cooper’s alignment of *Waterland*’s history with Baudrillard’s simulacrum indicates clearly how the novel has been read in sympathy with, if not as a reproduction of, poststructuralist discourse and, in particular, postmodernist historiography.³ Her further assessment of Crick’s tendency to see narrative as a “model of synchronized calibration” that lends structure to that which is fundamentally chaotic and unstructured further aligns Crick with narrativists like White and Ankersmit who see the various events of history as fundamentally chaotic and unordered and narrative as an *ex post facto* means of ordering them, providing, as Cooper via Derrida puts it, “the structurality of structure” to unstructured “traces” of the past. The structure of narrative is, in this view, merely a linguistically constructed heuristic with no inherent mimetic claim, unmooring historical narrative from any access to the real.

When Price sarcastically asks if “we can find whatever meaning we like in history” (140), Crick’s internal response echoes and reiterates those of narrativist historians like White: “I do believe that. I believe it more and more. History: a lucky dip

of meanings. Events elude meaning, but we look for meaning. Another definition of Man: the animal who craves meaning—but knows—” (140). Crick’s internal monologue, interrupted by his vocal confrontation of Price, indicates the unspeakable possibility that historians like White have been offering, that history itself, or at the very least, historical narrative, has nothing to teach us. Rather, even as we crave meaning, we, as Crick puts it, “know” that history is meaningless, devoid of progress and teleology and irremediably beyond our grasp. However, while *Waterland* is typically read as a postmodern novel which reflects the radical skepticism of poststructural discourse in relation to the referentiality of language and narrative, it ultimately joins *Between the Acts* as an example of postmodernist historical fiction that denies the most extreme consequences of this theoretical viewpoint and retains the possibility of referencing the real. It does so both through its focus on nonnarratable events and through its concentration on anti-narrative experiences that resist signification and which influence time to run in both directions at once as the river Ouse is said to do through the Fenlands.

Waterland’s opposition to the extreme relativism of narrativist historiography takes place, like Woolf’s, through a skepticism towards the narrative form and, in particular, through an examination of alternatives to narrative, particularly the nonnarratable and anti-narrative. Theorization of the former is provided in two seminal

works of narrative theory, D. A. Miller's *Narrative and Its Discontents* and Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*. Both suggest that narrative can only be created in the presence of "narratable" elements, that is, situations of inquietude, instability, and "insufficiencies, defaults, deferrals" (Miller 3). In this construction, narrative itself is constituted by lack, like human subjectivity in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lack itself, particularly of satisfaction, presence, and fulfillment is then perpetually sustained by narrative itself, while satisfaction, fulfillment and quietude make only brief appearances at the beginnings and ends of narratives. According to Miller, something must always be missing but desired to keep the narrative middle in motion. Once what is missing in a narrative is found, the narratable story is complete and the narrative itself must end.⁴ While in traditional narrative, beginnings and endings are characterized by stability and sufficiency, soon a problem or insufficiency is introduced and sustained in order for a narrative to be necessary. An event is only narratable, then, if it is comprised not only of insufficiency and lack, but also of a "desire" for sufficiency and wholeness.

Brooks's model of narrative, in particular, has been justly criticized from many vantage points, not the least of which is its reliance on masculine sexuality for its central metaphor, effectively naturalizing masculinity and marginalizing the possibility of feminine narration, a point to which I will return. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, it

does provide a useful heuristic for understanding what is one of the central functions of traditional narration: to take a complicated and chaotic series of desires, needs, and questions and to bring them into a semblance of order by resolving difficult questions and satisfying desires. These desires are not merely those of the characters in the narrative, but more importantly those of the readers whose questions get answered and whose desires are vicariously realized.

This reflects, once again, the theoretical underpinning of narrativist historians like Hayden White who offer that the element of narrative that undercuts its access to reality is its obsessive need for the fulfillment of meaning that gives historical narrative the illusion of completion. Historical narrative poses historical problems, lacks, and insufficiencies and resolves them in a conclusion that brings chaos into order and satisfies the desire of the reader to understand historical events. This wrestling of chaos into order takes place through the process of emplotment that is most complete in narrative, if still inferred in earlier forms like the annals and the chronicle. If narrative, then, is constituted by the lack of meaning and the desire for meaning, it is equally constituted in its completion, says White, by the satisfaction of that desire and the filling of the lack. It is this trajectory of narrative, from quietude, satisfaction, and fulfillment through desire, dissatisfaction and lack and back to the original state that, for White, constitutes narrative

itself and which deforms the real by providing the illusion of the ordering of chaos and the satisfaction of the desire for order.

Although both Miller and Brooks stress that the satisfaction of reading narrative is the sense of continuous displacement and delayed gratification in the long middle between the (en)closures of beginning and end, it is clear that, for White, the danger of narrative's deformation of the real is in the false sense of satisfied meaning and (to use his term) "explanation" that arises out of the narrative whole, including its closure. In this, White echoes the definition of narrative presented by Lawrence Stone in the introduction of this study, particularly in its dependency upon endings, or teleology, for its power to generate meaning. *Waterland* affirms the power of narrative endings in generating meaning, as well as the comforting power of narrative to provide coherence and understanding in the face of a bewildering and alienating history. As I will show, however, Swift's novel also illustrates the ways in which traditional narrative must be undercut from within and, in doing so, both implicitly and explicitly insists upon the possibility of accessing the historical real.

While I contend that the novel as a whole does oppose the most extreme ramifications of relativist historiography, it is clear that for Thomas Crick narrative *does* serve the purpose that White attributes to it. That is, Crick says that narrative does allay

fears and gives a sense of satisfaction through explanation that covers up or obscures the vertiginous sense of lost meaning inherent in the chaos of everyday life and the trauma of history. For Crick, however, as for psychoanalytic theorists of narrative like Sigmund Freud himself, narrative, even in its historical form, is not principally a dangerous deformation of the real but is rather a necessary coping strategy that allows humans to come to terms with the world in which they live.

However, at the same time that Crick acknowledges narrative as a means of necessary alleviation of alienation and lost meaning, he allows for the possible access to the real that White denies narrative *a priori*. Swift's novel suggests that such access to the real can be achieved if not through narration itself, then through its failure to fulfill its ideal form in two distinct modes. First, the novel suggests that if the real is obscured by the act of narration, within narrative itself, and in particular, the narration of *Waterland*, there are non-narratable moments that work to subvert the desire and lack inherent in narrative and rather focus on the dull, quotidian, everyday events that would be unlikely to generate narrative. It is through the deployment of these nonnarratable moments that Swift's novel counters the deformations of the grand narrative of Britain and reveals the human suffering and daily life of its workers, so often ignored in traditional histories meant to sustain narrative interest. In order to draw attention to the reality of this

nonnarratable history, Swift presents it alongside the hypernarratable family history of the Atkinsons replete and overflowing with those elements so often deployed to excite readerly desire and to encourage the need for delayed gratification inherent in the most narratable stories. The juxtaposition of the hypernarratable family romance and the nonnarratable elements of stasis and boredom associated with Crick's native fens maintains the possibility of access to historical reality through the nonnarratable, while foregrounding the ways that narration deforms reality to suit its needs.

In addition, while White focuses on the ways in which narrative itself incorporates individual actions and events into its story that conveys meaning, Swift suggests, through his formulation of the "Here and Now," that certain traumatic occurrences and formative events, while narrated, nevertheless exceed narrative's capacity to bestow them with meaning. Rather, the anti-narrative real exceeds the symbolization and textualization that narrative provides it with and allows for the possibility of accessing the materiality of the present itself through the very failure of symbolization that characterizes the traumatic moments of the "Here and Now."

Through these dual stratagems, and in opposition to its own protagonist, *Waterland*, like Price, refuses to advocate the notion that history itself is the fictionalization of fact through the medium of narration. Instead, it insists upon the reality of the past and the

possibility of its accessibility in the present. This refusal of historical relativism is, like Woolf's, tied importantly to issues of politics and ethics, particularly, in the case of *Waterland*, to the objection to traditional narrative's tendency to obscure the histories of the working-class and to exalt imperialism.

The Progress of the Atkinsons

Sigmund Freud advocated the talking cure as an at least functional cure for his neurotic patients. In doing so, he proposed the reconstruction of past events and their retelling, along with the reintegration of repressed traumatic moments as the key to a healthy and functioning subjectivity. In this, Freud offers narrative as a fundamental means to understanding the self and of dealing with the past in all of its oppressive "presence." When Nietzsche advocates the abolition of history as a means to break free of the weight of tradition, and to allow freedom for the human will, he took what may well have been the first preemptive step in breaking the tyranny of modern subjectivity offered by Freud. In doing so, Nietzsche takes initial steps in constructing an idea of postmodern subjectivity based on the performance of the self, rather than the discovery of its essence.

Thomas Crick, the historian of *Waterland*, interestingly combines the viewpoints of these seemingly antithetical thinkers. While Crick continually refers to history itself and his own biography as a fairy-tale, effectively abolishing any claims he has to referentiality before embarking upon his tale, he likewise insists upon the necessity of its telling as a means to bestow reality with an explanation and to overcome the vertigo of meaning's absence from human existence. In doing so, he echoes postmodernist historians like White who see narration as a significant deformation of the reality it purports to represent, while, in opposition to White, nevertheless insisting on the continuation of narrative as the primary means of conveying historical data.

Certainly, Crick sees narration as a necessary and powerful tool:

Children, who will inherit the world. Children to whom, throughout history, stories have been told, chiefly but not always at bedtime, in order to quell restless thoughts; whose need of stories is matched only by the need adults have of children to tell stories to, of receptacles for their stock of fairy-tales, of listening ears on which to unload those most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives. (7)

Crick offers the possibility that history and biography are, perhaps, fairy-tales, but that they nevertheless are necessary for providing comfort, not only for children who are soothed by listening to tales, whether they be historical or fictional, but also for adults who are comforted by telling stories. He voices this dual interpretation of both history and story, along with its necessity to humanity throughout the novel, but nowhere more

forcefully than when, in speaking to his class, he identifies “man” as the storytelling animal,

Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right. Even in his last moments, it’s said, in the split second of a fatal fall—or when he’s about to drown—he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life. (63)

In this passage, in the same fashion as David Carr, Crick offers narrative not merely as a possible appeasement of anxieties, but as a natural inclination of a humanity that needs to unify and explain the chaotic elements of life.⁵

Crick likewise reveals the ultimate desire of narrative-oriented people, and historians in particular: the desire for the story that explains everything, that quells all doubts and integrates all chaotic elements into one coherent story. This is what contemporary theory calls a “metanarrative,” or a narrative that integrates all other narratives. When Crick asserts that “your history teacher wishes to give the complete and final version” (8), he voices the desire of totalization, the quest for a metaphysical Truth that will alleviate all fears of a meaningless existence.

As I discussed at length in the introduction of this study, contemporary theoreticians of history, often claim that the desire Crick expresses here is the central aim of traditional history; the desire to unify all stories into one overarching meta-story that

explains everything, the Great Story itself. Crick then indicates a common longing, or desire, for a History that reconciles all of life's contradictions and discontinuities into a narrative that explains the past and the present in the context of each other and gives meaning to life as it is lived. Despite Crick's continuity with postmodernist historians and poststructuralist thinkers in his skepticism towards the possibility of accessing material reality through narrative, his longing for a unifying and totalizing classical history is in direct contradiction with most politically-oriented poststructuralist thought, particularly that of Foucault. While Crick longs for a "complete and final version" of history, Foucault argues that "history becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being—" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 88). Foucault juxtaposes the totalizing impulse of history which Crick embodies and suggests a new history, or genealogy, that dismantles, rather than unifies. Indeed, while Crick insists on the traditional form of narrative in conveying historical events, Foucault insists that "the traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for tracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled" ("Nietzsche" 88).

It would be naïve, however, to associate Crick's early interest in and insistence on a totalizing and unifying classical history, with an attempt in the novel to go back to this

classical model. Rather, everything in *Waterland* suggests that Crick's longing is a desperate one that is already antiquated before it is voiced. While the novel does engage with a model of unifying classical history, it is a model that has proven not to be messianic in its completion, but rather has died with a whimper rather than with a bang. British imperialism, the model of a unified world Empire under the flag of Britain, and the narrative of progress, is shown both in its period of ascendancy and in its inevitable decline through the narrative trajectory of the brewmaking Atkinson family. By the time Crick replaces the school's traditional curriculum with his own family history, he is on the verge of being made redundant, not, purportedly, because of his unorthodox teaching methods, but rather because history itself is no longer a subject worth studying and will be merged with "general studies." As Lewis Scott, the headmaster, puts it, "we're cutting back on history" (5).

Here, Crick's dream of a unifying and totalizing History is exploded both from within and from without, both through the restructuring of British public education and through the fall of the British Empire. With the dissolution of the British Empire, the totalizing narrative of progress and the Empire's messianic mission must also be dismantled. It is this narrative that underpins the novel's longest chapter, "About the Rise of the Atkinsons"(63-105), and is revealed to be a house of cards, not a "complete

and final version,” but rather depriving England of its reassuring stability of “life and nature.” While the grand narrative of progress once provided communal identity and reassurance to the hegemonic interests in the British Empire, particularly in England itself, with its loss history becomes “pointless information” with no “practical relevance to today’s real world” (25) to use the headmaster’s words.⁶

Throughout *Waterland*, Thomas Crick, like Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts*, offers both a traditional narrative of causality and progress and withdraws it, simulating the act of critical deconstruction, providing both a traditional reading and its internal inconsistencies. In doing so, he presents, as Linda Hutcheon has observed, a history both complicit in its reenacting of traditional narrative and its deconstructive critique. The initial narrative of progress traces the history of the East Anglia fens from the Dutch arrival of Cornelius Vermuyden in 1655, through the efforts of Crick’s “water people” ancestors to participate in land reclamation. It then moves on to the hiring of the Cricks by the Atkinsons who embody the progress of capitalism through their founding of breweries and their ability to use the fens to transport their beer to their customers. The rise of the Atkinsons is then detailed patrilineally, as each member of the Atkinson dynasty is profiled both in the capitalist success of their breweries and through the “begetting of heirs” (69) to inherit the family business and carry on the patriarchal

metanarrative of progress and expansion. The inherent maleness of this narrative of progress is emphasized throughout the Atkinson story and fits in amiably with the masculinist paradigm of narrative itself as offered by Brooks. First, it is clearly illustrated with the preoccupation with the “begetting of heirs.” In addition, it is evident in how George and Alfred Atkinson redirect the energies of their Oedipal desires from their mother toward their work, illustrating the phallic narrative *par excellence* of Freudian psychoanalysis. Finally, it is emphasized in the studied effort to ignore and marginalize the female members of each Atkinson family, particularly the children of the brothers George and Alfred, whose daughters are named but dismissed as irrelevant because they are not heirs to the family fortune. Indeed, they are explicitly excluded when Crick emphasizes the shortage of heirs in the Atkinson family: “to be certain of one heir, it is well to beget several” (87).

Here, the narrative of progressive history, as it is associated with the Atkinsons is pinpointed by Swift specifically within a male English power structure which parallels closely the expansion of the British Empire. The parallel of the Atkinson rise to the rise of Empire in general is indicated by the occasions for which the Atkinsons brew “special” versions of their heralded beer, “The Grand ‘51’; The Empress of India’; ‘The Golden Jubilee’; ‘The Diamond Jubilee’” (93), all celebrations of British Imperial success.

Crick, indeed, makes this parallel concrete when he offers the rise of the Atkinsons as metonymic for that of the Empire as a whole.

Have they not brought great improvement to a whole region, and do they not continue to bring it? Do they not travail long and indefatigably in the council chamber as well as in the boardroom, for the welfare of the populace? Have they not established, out of their own munificence, an orphanage, a town newspaper, a public meeting-hall, a boys' school, [...] a bath house, — a fire station? And are not all these works, and others, proof of that great Idea [of progress] that sways them; proof that all private interest is subsumed by the National Interest and all private empires do but pay tribute to the Empire of Great Britain? (92)

This passage clearly illustrates how the metanarrative of History provides confidence and reassurance through the great Idea of Progress (identified explicitly in the previous paragraph) to those who profit by it. The passage also shows that this Idea excludes many others, particularly women who are absent from the schools and those colonized peoples whose private interest is sacrificed for, rather than subsumed by, the National Interest. Indeed, Crick's narrative of Atkinsonian progress follows a Foucauldian trajectory in more ways than one as two of the subjects of Foucault's primary studies have a prominent but marginalized role in the Atkinson family narrative. The Atkinson family founds a mental institution in an effort to marginalize and institutionalize the mad, including the family matriarch Sarah Atkinson and, later, Crick's father, Henry. Likewise, via their incestuous affair, Crick's mother (Helen Atkinson Crick) and her father (Ernest Atkinson) fall squarely into the realm of the perverse, the

specification of which Foucault sees as central to the construction of Victorian sexuality.

In the detailing of the stories of the mad and the perverse, the reader is encouraged to note how the Victorian narrative of progress is far from universal and rather necessitates the isolation and containment of certain elements of the family and/or the nation for the wholeness of the narrative to be comforting.

It is, of course, a commonly voiced truism that the histories that count as history come from the perspective of the victor and that those who are excluded are those that are oppressed. As Walter Benjamin puts it “one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable, with the victor. [...] Whoever has engaged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. [...] the spoils are carried along with the procession” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History” 256). For Benjamin, history is not, of course, a recounting of universal progress, but is the narrative of class conflict, which always includes both dominators and dominated. Through this Marxian perspective, it becomes clear why Ernest (the perverse) is the only Atkinson who is vocally and politically anti-Imperialist and an anti-Tory who has dabbled in socialism, Marxism and Fabianism at the university (156-62), further cementing his position as outside the narrative of capitalist progress. Ernest’s presence suggests the possibility of an anti-

hegemonic counternarrative to that of the rest of the capitalist and progressive Atkinson family, a counternarrative that Swift offers not only through the deployment of Ernest himself, but more significantly through the narrator's paternal ancestors, the Cricks.

The identification of the limited perspective of the supposedly universal history of imperial progress is not left only to the reader to infer, however. Rather, Crick himself indicates the constructedness and provisional nature of the progressive narrative by the attempt to identify the precise apex of the Atkinson family fortune, attempting to configure, once and for all, a narrative around the family progress through the building of drama, a climax, and a denouement. Crick offers several possible moments as the precise time of the zenith of progress after which the decline ensues. He muses upon the precise date of the apex of the Atkinson family fortune, finally concluding with, on one hand, 1872, the year Atkinson Ale is sent to imperial India, and on the other, 1874, the year Arthur is elected to parliament as the representative from Gildsey, the Atkinsons build their asylum, Sarah Atkinson dies, a great flood waters down the previously superior Atkinson beer, and Ernest Atkinson is born.

Here, as White, suggests, history itself is not "found" in the sense that the important events are already immanent and incontrovertible, rather Crick, the historian,

constructs the climax of Atkinsonian progress by making a choice among the possible climaxes.

When can we fix the zenith of the Atkinsons? When can we date the high summer of their success? Was it on that June day in 1849? Or was it later, in 1851, when among the products privileged to be represented at the Great Exhibition was a bottled ale from the Fens, known appropriately as ‘Grand 51,’ which [...] won a silver medal for excellence [...]? Was it before that, in 1846, when [...] George Atkinson was unanimously elected mayor? Or was it in 1848 [...] when his brother Alfred succeeded to the same office [...]

Was in it 1862?⁷ (91)

The family history of the Atkinsons is self-consciously constructed retrospectively to fit the narrative of progress common to Victorian England.⁸ In doing so, Crick exposes this narrative not as immanent, concrete and referential, but as more story than fact. In a gesture that echoes the Lacanian construction of the Symbolic register, history is always constructed in reverse, from now to then, as opposed to chronologically, from then to now. As Slavoj Žižek notes:

the past exists as it is included, as it enters (into) the synchronous net of the signifier — that is, as it is symbolized in the texture of the historical memory — and that is why we are all the time ‘rewriting history,’ retrospectively giving the elements their symbolic weight by including them in new textures — it is this elaboration which decides retroactively what they ‘will have been.’” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 56)

Žižek notes that history itself can only be given its meaning by looking back at events through the prism of currently dominant “regimes of truth,” meaning systems, or in Žižek’s Lacanian terms, the Symbolic register.⁹ Current systems of understanding

lend the weight of meaning to the random and heretofore meaningless events of the past. Indeed, Žižek's extreme rhetoric here indicates that the past, as such, does not exist until it is integrated into a system of signification that contains it and fits it into a broader framework ("the synchronous net of the signifier"). In Freudian psychoanalysis, of course, previous traumatic events are integrated into the story of a person's life, ideally allowing the person, finally, to encounter their past and understand it, resulting in a healthier subjectivity. This therapeutic view of narrative is echoed both by Crick and by his mother, Helen Atkinson:

she believes in stories. She believes that they're a way of bearing what won't go away, a way of making sense of madness. [...] Like frightened children, what they most want is to be told stories. And out of this discovery she evolves a precept: No, don't forget. Don't erase it. You can't erase it. But make it into a story. Just a story. Yes, everything's crazy. What's real? All a story. Only a story... (225)

Here Helen, who is a nurse in a post-World War I convalescent hospital, the Kessling Home of Neurasthenics, reveals an instinctive Freudianism in which traumatic events must be integrated into a narrative in order to deal with the "craziness" that threatens from within and from without.

As we have seen, Hayden White moves this type of logic from the micro-level of the subject to the macro-level of historical narrative, asserting that historical events too must be integrated into a narrative form in order for them to be understood and for the

past to be made present through the process of historical emplotment.¹⁰ Indeed, White makes the parallel of historical emplotment to psychoanalysis explicit when he states:

This [the process of emplotment] is not unlike what happens, or is supposed to happen, in psychotherapy. [...] The problem is to get the patient to 'reemplot' his whole life history in such a way as to change the *meaning* of those events for him and their significance for the economy of the whole set of events that make up his life. [...] Historians seek to refamiliarize us with events which have been forgotten through either accident, neglect or repression [...] not only by providing more information about them, but also by showing how their developments conform to one or another of the story types that we conventionally invoke to make sense of our life stories" (White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 86-87).

White stresses the necessity of integrating historical events into a narrative that explains them to the reader and that the way to accomplish this is to use forms familiar from fictive writing. The familiarity of these forms has nothing to do with their mimetic or referential capability, but has rather to do with the conventions that are recognized by and familiar to the reader.¹¹ While, then, the emplotment of historical events is necessary for the present's therapeutic understanding of the past, this understanding is largely a fictional one because the emplotment of events transforms "historical texts" into "literary artifacts" that are as much fiction as fact. From this it is clear that in each of these theoretical frameworks, it is assumed that the past, in itself, either does not exist or is meaningless until it is integrated into a narrative or some other system of symbolization.¹² The former claim that the past does not exist is a radical stance that is not taken seriously

by any theorist, but is rather deployed, as by Žižek, for rhetorical effect. At the same time, however, the distinction becomes unimportant if any attempt to access and/or represent that past is fruitless.

Crick's self-conscious discussion of the retrospective construction of the story of the Atkinsons indicates his own knowledge that the history he tells is not found, but is rather dictated retrospectively by the Symbolic in which he operates. In this case, the important events of the Atkinson narrative are determined to be so by a larger Victorian narrative of progress with the highest levels of Atkinsonian achievement not coincidentally approximating the climax of the British Empire itself. Crick's explicit exposure of the retrospective narrativization of the Atkinson story also indicates a skepticism towards the immanence and material presence of the imperialist narrative of progress that it parallels. Through analogy, the rise of Great Britain seems not only to exist through a backward-looking glance from Crick's position in post-Empire decline. As such, progress itself only exists from the vantage point of its opposite and appears to the reader as a construction that dissolves into the series of selections and erasures that characterizes the Atkinson history.

Process and the Cricks

While it is clear, then, that Crick's theorization of history has much in common with narrativist and constructivist historiography, particularly in his skepticism towards the possibility of accurate historical reference, it is equally clear that Crick does not disapprove of the deforming nature of narrativization in representing the past. He rather, like his mother, embraces the necessity of narration as a therapeutic and comforting re-mapping of the chaotic and disquieting otherness of the past. Crick's recounting of the Atkinson family story indicates a self-reflexive acknowledgment of the constructedness of their historical progress. However, it also embraces the story itself as a comfort that helps Crick define his own life in terms of the Atkinsonian progress, while simultaneously seeing their decline as parallel to the decline of the British Empire, helping to explain his own impending unemployment. Crick acknowledges Imperial progress as an ideologically narrow myth but also incorporates it into both the national and individual narrative necessary for survival and sanity. In this way, narrative itself is associated with the idea of progress, with one event following another, connected by causality and leading to a teleological conclusion that explains and realizes the previous events, in the way that Stone defines historical narrative.

While Crick participates in the art of narration and consistently refers to its necessity in fighting the vertigo of meaninglessness, the novel indicates that narration itself and the progress it is associated with, while perhaps necessary for historical presentation, not only does not bring us closer to the real but rather accomplishes the opposite: deforming the meaningless detritus of everyday life into the comfort of storytelling. Is there, then, an alternative that would allow us to confront the real of the past and if so, why would such an alternative be necessary when narrative itself provides such comfort?

While Crick is quick to recount narratives of historical progress and, indeed, to define humanity itself, or at least “man,” by his desire for narration and storytelling, he is simultaneously drawn to the opposite argument that narrative obscures the truth and, as such, merely conceals and falsifies without lending “meaning” or comfort. The confrontation of these two opposing viewpoints is carried out through a conversation between Crick and his recalcitrant (yet favored) student, Price. While Crick insists on the necessity of narration as both a comforting and therapeutic explanation of events,¹³ Price argues the opposite by insisting on the importance of referentiality to facts. Price argues that, “explaining is a way of avoiding the facts while you pretend to get near to them” (167). Pushing his point further, Price points out that explanation itself, tied by Crick to

narration and storytelling, is not a signifier of comfort and quiescence but is rather a sure sign of trouble and disquiet. “people only explain when things are wrong, don’t they, not when they’re right? So the more explaining you hear, the more you think things must be pretty bad that they need so much explaining” (167). Here, Price reiterates the views of Brooks and Miller in identifying the narratable as a moment of disquiet, instability, and danger, not merely as the resolving of those inquietudes. In this reading, explanation and narration become not merely symbols of the resolving of instability and lack but a signifier of their presence. Narration is then seen, by both Price and Crick, not as a means to access the facts, but as a means of avoiding them, while it is simultaneously not only a means to provide comfort, but also a signifier of inquietude and the “pretty bad” nature of the world. In this case, the argument that an alternative to narrative is unnecessary is punctured. If narrative neither provides historical accuracy nor soothes inquietude but is rather a signifier of it, surely an alternative *is* necessary.

In response, the novel does offer a mode of historical presentation that is not, or at least not traditionally, narrational and shies away from explanation in the narrative mode. Whereas narrative is linked explicitly to progress, causality, and teleology, the opposite of such storytelling commonplaces is offered by the symbolic process of land drainage provided in *Waterland*. While the Atkinsons oversee land drainage and brewmaking in

their progressive rise up the social scale of *Gildsey and Empire*, Thomas's paternal ancestors, the Cricks, actually participate in the day-to-day activity of drainage and "human siltation" which is characterized almost completely by a lack of progress. Crick, indeed, explicitly compares the process of land drainage to traditional teleological and progressive histories, noting their fundamental differences: "So forget, indeed, your revolutions, your turning-points, your grand metamorphosis of history. Consider, instead, the slow and arduous process, the interminable and ambiguous process — the process of human siltation — of land reclamation." (10)

As Crick notes, this process of land reclamation is completely unrelated to the idea of progress so closely associated with the Atkinsons. Rather, it is "Silt: which shapes and undermines continents: which demolishes as it builds; which is simultaneous accretion and erosion: neither progress nor decay" (9). In addition, while narration and progress are explicitly associated with retrospective construction, fabulation, and, indeed, falsification, the process of drainage and uneventful repetition that is associated with siltation is explicitly associated with the real itself: "To live in the Fens is to receive strong doses of reality. The great flat monotony of reality: the wide empty spaces of reality" (17). This definition of reality is elaborated later in the novel:

Reality's not strange, not unexpected. Reality doesn't reside in the sudden hallucination of events. Reality is uneventfulness, vacancy, flatness. Reality is that nothing happens. How many of the events of history have

occurred, ask yourselves, for this and for that reason, but for no other reason fundamentally, than the desire to make things happen? I present to you History, the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama. History, and its near relative, Histrionics. (40)

Here, Crick offers “History” as the presentation of intensely narratable events that stimulate interest; it is characterized by large, transformative happenings or events of local or worldwide significance. These events, or “actions” if we recall Virginia Woolf’s formulation, normally taken to be history itself are here capitalized as “History,” but History in this case is characterized not by its referentiality but by its “reality-obscuring” drama. However, in this passage, this does not mean that reality itself is completely inaccessible as it is in many extreme poststructural formulations. Rather, reality itself is here characterized by the nonnarratable, or those moments that lack narrative interest: the flat, the quotidian, the boring, and the repetitive, the lack of events themselves.

My appropriation of the term nonnarratable is not here precisely identical to the meaning deployed by Brooks or Miller. Miller, in particular, declares the nonnarratable in traditional narrative to be the achievement of the narrative’s goals, or the attainment of “happiness” in terms of the conflicts central to the narrative. “Narrative proceeds toward, or regresses from, what it seeks or seems most to prize, but is never identical to it. To designate the presence of what is sought or prized is to signal the termination of narrative” (3). In this way, Miller analogizes nonnarratability and closure itself, the latter

being more central to his interests. Nevertheless, implicit to the term “nonnarratability” is the idea of people, events, or situations that are simply not worth narrating, at least to the reading community addressed. As Miller puts it, “What defines a nonnarratable element is its incapacity to generate a story. Properly or intrinsically, it has no narrative future —”(5). Additionally, Tzvetan Todorov asserts that narrative is defined by the “transition from one state to another” (51). In this light, nonnarratability can be not only associated with the undermining of conflict inherent to the “happy ending” but can also be associated with boredom, flatness or emptiness; an absence of plot, conflict, or events altogether, the nearly complete lack of transition from one state to another.¹⁴ The nonnarratable, then, is explicitly linked to land drainage, siltation, and the working-class Cricks, while the progressive, eminently narratable narrative of progress is located with the upwardly mobile middle-class Atkinsons. This distinction is further solidified with the attention paid to the events in the lives of the Atkinsons when contrasted with the astonishing lack of events in the lives of the Cricks.

The separation of the narratable lives of the Atkinsons and the nonnarratable lives of the Cricks is personified in the figure of Thomas Atkinson, the first of the Atkinson family to become “larger than life.” Thomas becomes, “a monument. Man of Enterprise, Man of Good Works, Man of Civic Honor” (75). He becomes, in short, a central part of

the community's narrative of itself, transcending his own physical existence and becoming a narrational symbol, separating him from the workers around him, "He can no longer stand by one of his new drains and clap the shoulders of the man who has helped dig it. The labourers, who once worked beside him—the Cricks perhaps among them—now touch forelocks, venerate him, regard him as a sort of god" (75). Here, a commentary is made on who and what is worth narrating and highlighting in 19th century Gildsey, and not coincidentally in the simulacrum of 19th century fiction that occurs here. The middle-class Atkinson is raised to a level of symbol and hero while his workers, including the Cricks, are mere observers or worshippers at the altar of middle-class achievement.

Thomas Atkinson's heroic status is reflected in the stories of Victorian Gildsey. Not only do the Atkinsons progress both socially and economically, but they are also central participants in all of the town's dramatic events. Their lives are filled with exciting, hypernarratable events that are familiar from previous narratives and fictions. That is, their "lives" are narratable to the degree that their narrativity has been proven so many times in previous texts, as suggested by White's theorization of modes of emplotment derived from previous narratives. This is particularly the case with the (his)story of Thomas Atkinson and his wife Sarah. Thomas famously strikes Sarah in a

fit of jealousy, reducing her to a vegetative state, while he lives out the rest of his days in a fit of guilt and recrimination, desperately trying to bring her back to her senses. The incident of the striking is explicitly described as a rumor (“no first hand account exists” (76)), but it becomes “history” precisely because of its dramatic narratability. Its status as dramatic conflict, happening, as it does, to the town greats, automatically makes it an event worthy of narration, regardless of its connections to the real of historical accuracy. After Thomas’s premature death, the distinction between the real history of the domestic abuse and the communal story of the event becomes even murkier, as additional possibilities get circulated in the town, and Sarah is narratively bestowed with the gift of prophecy. This only increases after her own death when stories of her ghost haunting her descendants become prevalent.

Crick intervenes in his own retrospective narration of these events, insisting that “There are times when we have to disentangle history from fairy-tale. There are times [...] when good dry textbook history takes a plunge into the old swamps of myth and has to be retrieved with empirical fishing lines. [...] At all costs let us avoid mystery-making and speculation, secrets and idle gossip” (86). While this seems to contradict his earlier allegiance to narrative as a representational mode, both the sarcastic tone in this passage and his account of the Atkinson family history highlight the near impossibility of the

separation of fact and fiction. While Sarah's blow to the head is a traumatic occurrence depriving her of speech and her own capacity for narration, she is easily integrated into a familiar cultural narrative. Trapped in an "upper room" (78) of the family residence and remarkably well-preserved until her ninety third birthday, Sarah takes on the role of an "exiled princess" with the details of her daily existence reflecting her position in the cultural narrative of the fairy-tale: "At regular times servants will come, with meals on a tray, to comb her hair, light the fire, prepare their mistress for bed, or merely to sit beside her at the window" (78) as if to wait for a prince to come and rescue her.¹⁵

Thomas Atkinson, then, is a heroic "captain of industry" until his mistreatment of the "princess" leads both reader and storyteller to emplot his life as a tragedy. Again, however, it is unclear what elements of their story are historically accurate and to what degree the readerly desire for coherent or consistent narration takes on a life of its own and produces familiar narrative models out of the raw material of the real. Tragedy and Romance (the fairy tale) are already seen here, while the later return of Sarah as both prophet and ghost, haunting the further transgressions of the Atkinson family provides another variation on the emplotment of Romance, the Gothic novel.¹⁶

Nearly every dramatic or traumatic event that occurs in the Gildsey community is explained by its incorporation into the family history of the Atkinsons. The flooding of

the community in 1874 and the subsequent decline of the quality of Atkinson beer is explained by the rumor/story of the ghost of Sarah tapping on the windows of Kessling Hall (103), while the burning down of the Atkinson brewery in 1911 is likewise attributed to the “apparition” of Sarah and the statements of “Fire! Smoke! Burning!” that she made while in her semi-coma.¹⁷ The words are converted from the ravings of the insane to prophecy by the Gildseyans who need to convert the contingent and traumatic events of their lives into a coherent story with the Atkinsons as its central characters.

In this way, large, dramatic, and narratable events are merged with the family history of the Atkinsons in order to construct community identity. Perhaps the most narratable event in the novel is also centered around the Atkinsons. Where narrative and narratability are defined by readerly desire, the surest way to extend and create this desire is the search to uncover a secret through the process of reading. The desire to uncover a secret is often at the center of plot-driven stories (like detective fiction, gothic novels, and horror tales), and “the secret” is a metonymic encapsulation of plot itself in theories of narrative that see a sustained and unrealized desire as the center of narration itself, particularly in Brooks’s *Reading for the Plot*. As Brooks discusses, via Roland Barthes’s *S/Z*, plot is defined by its near-identity with the “hermeneutic code,” the code of enigmas and answers, as opposed to the proairectic code, the code of actions (18). “The

hermeneutic code concerns rather the questions and answers that structure a story, their suspense, the partial unveiling, temporary blockage, eventual resolution. [...] The clearest and purest example of the hermeneutic would undoubtedly be the detective story”

(Brooks 18). Although action may be necessary to insure the progress of narrative, mystery is necessary to provoke readerly desire and to stimulate narratability itself. The “detective story” is always, of course, involved in the unveiling of a mystery or secret and can easily be seen to partake of all of the key words of the hermeneutic code: “questions,” “answers,” “suspense.” The desire associated with narrative and plotting is the desire of the reader to uncover the secrets of the plot and to answer the questions it poses. This desire is replicated within the text itself when there is a reader figure, whether it be a detective or an amateur, who also tries to uncover secrets and answer questions. It is for this reason that a secret lies at the heart of the narratable, as it enacts the desire of the reader to uncover and explain it.

It is no surprise then that, along with the great actions and events associated with the Atkinsons and tied to their association with linear progression, there is a deep secret at the center of their family drama. Thomas Crick, the son of Helen Atkinson (in turn the daughter of the last of the great Atkinsons, Ernest), plays the role of the reader and the detective in his desire to uncover and narrate the family secret. In the chapter entitled

“Detective Work” (209-12), Swift partakes of the long history of secret-driven fiction and, in particular, the eighteenth century gothic novel, by having Crick uncover the existence of the secret in a chest hidden in the attic of the family home. Within the box is not only the secret hidden stash of Ernest Atkinson’s Coronation Ale (made, appropriately, with a “secret recipe”), but also the Atkinson family history as told by Ernest. Here the near identity of “boxes” and “books,” both in their etymological origin and their capacity to hold and reveal secrets is in evidence.¹⁸ Within the family history is the secret towards which much of the narratable plot of the Atkinsons, and later of the united Atkinson/Crick family, leads.

Waterland’s contrast of the narratable (great actions and events, linear plotting, progress, teleology) with the nonnarratable (lack of actions and events, lack of progress) takes another leap here into the realm of the hypernarratable in its deployment of perhaps the most narratable, and overly narrated, secret in prose fiction. While the narrative theorists discussed above frequently refer to Freudian psychoanalytic theory as a means to explain narrative desire, in the case of *Waterland*, through the deployment of incest, Freudian psychoanalysis comes to stand in for the narratable itself. The revelation that Thomas Crick’s brother, the “potato-head” Dick, is a product of an incestuous union between their mutual mother Helen Atkinson, and their grandfather Ernest Atkinson

serves as an extreme, and approaching ridiculous, signal that the Atkinson story, despite its affiliation with History departs radically from the real because of its imbrication with the narratable. The parodic elements of the novel's appropriation of Freud becomes most obvious in the figure of Dick Crick, who is both the product of the most narratable and repeatedly narrated Freudian story (that of incest) *and* a huge phallic symbol by virtue of his name and his tremendously large physical stature. The fact that he is characterized, in turn, by his huge penis, turns him into a distorted and perverse symbol of Freudian psychoanalysis itself. He is produced by the Freudian compulsion for narration and appears as simply a byproduct or trace of Freudian narration rather than an actual subject connected with the real.

Swift's clear reference to Freudian psychoanalysis integrates with his critique of narrative as a whole, particularly historical narrative. While narrative itself is characterized by desire, Freud asserts that all desire is fundamentally incestuous, either directed toward the mother or towards a mother-substitute. Within this formulation, if desire is incestuous by its nature, the representation of incest is the representation of desire in its purest form. Likewise, wherein narration is itself a model for desire, incest becomes the epitome of narratability. This connection is further cemented by incestuous desire's status as a fundamentally repressed secret that must be exhumed and integrated

into the narrative of the talking cure. The uncovering of secrets is the nature of plot itself, reflected in the alternative definition of “plot” as “a secret plan.” Incestuous desire, then, is, according to the Freudian model, the deep, dark secret at the center of all of our psyches.¹⁹ The fact that incestuous desire is the secret at the center of not only psychoanalytic case studies, but also of so many fictions, indicates clearly its status as “hypernarratable.”²⁰ The huge, mentally-challenged, and phallically endowed figure of Dick Crick is then presented, in *Waterland*, as the realization of all readerly *and* sexual desires, while simultaneously subverting and mocking those desires.

The incestuous union of Helen and Ernest reaches its narrational conclusion with their mutual agreement to have a child who will be “The Savior of the World.” As narrator, Thomas Crick argues that “when fathers love daughters and daughters love fathers it’s like tying up into a knot the thread that runs into the future, it’s like a stream wanting to flow backwards” (228). Here, Crick seems to assert that despite incest’s status as eminently narratable, it cannot be a plot in the conventional sense after all in that it does not progress forward, but rather runs only backward into the past. Again, Swift suggests here the problems with narrative, despite its allure. Nevertheless, Ernest and Helen Atkinson insist on the completion of their narrative through the production of a son and the investment of this son with theological and teleological meaning, as the “Savior

of the World.” Here, Dick takes on the role of Victorian history, messianic, teleological, invested with meaning and truth. His actual status as a mentally deficient “potato-head” (in his half-brother’s words), indicates the failures of narrational and teleological thinking and how traditional history can never fulfill what it promises precisely because of its adherence to narration, and in particular the readerly desire for stimulation and explanation.

Dick, then, enters life as the purest of pure Atkinsons, inbred to maintain that purity, while his brother Thomas is a Crick as well. Following the logic of the narratable Atkinsons, it is no surprise that it is Dick who then commits the murder of Freddie Parr, triggering the events that provide the narratability in the (chronologically) latter part of the book and allow the story to continue. The murder mystery of Freddie’s killing, the abortion of Tom and Mary’s child designed to erase evidence of the murder, and the kidnapping of a child in the supermarket years later by Mary designed to replace the lost child, all can be said to spring from Dick’s initial action. It is true that the strict division between the narratable Atkinsons and the nonnarratable Cricks breaks down in the narrative present of the book, perhaps because the two families join through the marriage of Helen Atkinson and Henry Crick and the production of their son Thomas. Still, however, the purest of Atkinsons, Dick, triggers the narrative potency that perpetuates the

desire necessary for plot itself for the remainder of the novel. Despite this consistent linking of Dick to narrative and narrative desire, he becomes a key figure in the novel's formulation of the real, a point to which I shall return.

First, however, it is important to return to the Victorian Cricks. While the Atkinson family saga takes the position of the highly narratable production of History that strays from reality in its representation, the Cricks clearly represent one of the novel's versions of the real itself, particularly in their role in the day-to-day and quotidian process of land drainage. Where, however, it is quite easy to compile examples of the great events and actions in which the Atkinsons participate, it is not quite so simple to illustrate how exactly it is that the Cricks are nonnarratable, a reality principle to counter the deformations of narrative. Instead, while the longest chapter in the novel is devoted to the chronicling of the narratable Atkinson family drama, there is *no* chapter entitled "About the Cricks," and none of Thomas Crick's paternal ancestors receive any significant personalization, except for his father Henry, the World War I pilot who is nursed back to mental health by Helen Atkinson.

Nevertheless, the Cricks retain their symbolic potency and importance in the novel precisely in their juxtaposition to the Atkinsons. While the notion of Atkinsonian narrative progress implies change and the multiplication of events causally connected, the Cricks are specifically not associated with progress, but rather with the "process" of drainage. While the idea of narrative and progress necessitates the addition and multiplication of new lurid and sensational events to spark narrative interest, the Crickian idea of process merely requires the repetition of certain, usually boring, events over and over again. This allows the process of drainage and siltation to be described quickly,

over the course of approximately three pages, summarizing the process quite easily in a sentence or two, “When the land sinks below the water-level you have to pump” (14). Although there is, in one sense, progress in the technology of pumping, moving as it does from wind-powered to steam-powered, Crick is able to recount these changes over the course of two centuries in a page or two and shortly turns to the ambitions of economic investing in drainage by the Atkinsons. Again, however, while the Atkinson drama is needed to retain narrative interest, Crick offers that reality is the lack of progress and that real progress is paradoxically defined by its lack:

My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn't go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of Empires. (336)

If it is progress traditionally defined that has the “capacity to generate a story,” it is not progress in this sense that has access to the real. Instead, it is the “dull,” “hard,” “inglorious” hard work and day to day drudgery of land drainage. Indeed, if the contraction of the Roman and British Empires are any indication, the building of Empire is itself not a merely progressive development, but, as with dredging, it is characterized by progress and decline, with little appreciable change.

Inherent in these claims for the non-narrational access to the real is a political claim for the acknowledgment of the working-class. While the novel does not go so far as to try to chronicle the day-to-day work of the Cricks at the expense of the more lurid and narratively interesting middle-class Atkinsons, the contrast of the narratable events of

the Atkinsons and the accompanying assertion that History itself is a “reality-obscuring drama,” with the vacancy of the Fens as “reality” itself, emphasizes the importance of the working-class Cricks and how a singular attention to the Atkinsons can be misleading and damaging. Indeed, according to the novel, the Crickian nonnarratability gains an epistemological privilege and access to the real not afforded the more narratable Atkinson’s. Similarly, Crick’s sympathy with Price’s materialist critique of his own constructivism combined with Price’s own role as the symbol of and advocate for the oppressed working class in the arena of the classroom, indicates that the working-class concerns of the Cricks should not be erased or ignored lest the “thousands of corpses [...] strewn over the battleground of Europe” that Price refers to are too easily made part of a comfortingly narratable story.

The key distinction between the Atkinsonian historical model and its Crickian shadow can be illustrated through a deployment of Michel de Certeau’s definition of history itself. De Certeau argues that historical discourse normally creates what is to be defined as the real through acts of division that separate the present from the past. While de Certeau insists that “First of all, historiography separates its present time from a past” (de Certeau, *Writing of History* 36), this act of separation allows for the revelation of two versions of the real. The first is the material reality of the past, which is always Other

from the present. This Other of the past, like any other group defined as Other, helps the present subject define himself or herself by contrasting its unintelligibility with the self of the present: “*intelligibility is established through a relation with the other*” (3; emphasis in original). In this case, the real exists only in the past, but is deployed as a means of understanding the present.

The second version of de Certeau’s historical real is the *process* of historical discourse itself, “the real insofar as it is entangled within the scientific operations (the present society, to which the historian’s problematics, their procedures, modes of comprehension, and finally a practice of meaning are referable)” (35). Here, de Certeau plays, once again, upon the two key meanings of the word history. One refers to all past material reality, the other to its telling (“the practice of history”). “To be sure [...] ‘history’ connotes both a science and that which it studies—the explication which is *stated*, and the reality of *what has taken place*” (21; emphasis in original) italics. De Certeau offers that both of these poles of history are in fact “poles of the real,” that the real can both be found in the reality of past events, and in the present process of the production of historical discourse. In this, de Certeau offers that the most accurate history is that which plumbs the depths of the schism between these two forms of the real, the first a recounting of events which are, unfortunately, irremediably other, and

therefore impossible to recount with complete accuracy, and the second an investigation of historical discourse's own practices and epistemological assumptions. "Historical science takes hold precisely in their relation to one another, and its proper objective is developing this relation into a discourse" (35).

Certainly the call to see the real of the past as not merely transparent reportage, but also as the acknowledgment of the construction and production of the text of history is sympathetic with postmodernism itself and with texts commonly associated with it, like Spiegelman's *Maus*. Self-reflexivity and the repeated reference to a text's own textuality are standard hallmarks of postmodern literature, historical or otherwise. Here, however, de Certeau indicates that it is the intersection of the reality of the past, however inaccessible it may be, *with* a self-reflexive investigation of the production of history that allows access to the real, indicating that the discursive process must be combined, juxtaposed with or read alongside material reality itself. Again, the dialectic nature of matter and representation is asserted, as in the Bergsonian model outlined in Chapter One.

Here, *Waterland's* sense of the real makes its intervention. To de Certeau, and much contemporary historical thought, the past is irremediably passed and cannot be made intelligible except, perhaps, through the investigation of the ruptures, changes, or

transitions that make the past other, separating it from the present. However, these claims of de Certeau's take part in the logic of narrativity, explaining history and the real precisely through the great events and wide scale change that create narrative and narrative desire. In this view, the past is separated from the present through irreversible chasms that separate our understanding of the present from the past, creating a kind of mystery surrounding their difference. Narration attempts to make these chasms less painful and inexplicable, by explaining the past in such a way that the present becomes more intelligible. This, however, partakes heavily of the logic of narration, wherein there is, at the very least, the Todorovian "transition from one state to another" if not outright "progress." As we have seen, however, *Waterland* suggests that this faith in and reference to progress and narratability is not the real at all. Rather, lack of change and stasis, the circular movement forward and retreat of siltation is real, suggesting that, in fact, the past is not irremediably passed, or an inaccessible Other, but is, in fact, always present, in the sense that the large changes that make the past separated from the present are more narratable deformations of the real than its accurate presentation.

Indeed, the two branches of de Certeau's real come together in the hard inglorious work of the Cricks. Their pumping of water is both past material reality and a process, not of the labor of historical presentation, but of the labor of land drainage. Implicit in

the concept of process, as opposed to progress is the inevitability of repetition and circularity, in which the same procedures are carried out repeatedly in both the past and the present, and presumably the future as well. The logic of progressive historical narrative that banishes the past irrevocably to the past as an inaccessible Other, is substantially, although not completely, belied by the concept of process that implies that the actions of the past are repeated in the present and that they may not be completely lost, epistemologically speaking, after all. While the grand changes and divisions of past from present described by de Certeau help to define the present subject by his or her Other in the past, the concept of process, and lack of progress, portrayed in *Waterland* by the Cricks' labor offers that the subject can also be defined by a continuity with a past whose hard, inglorious labor is repeated and reproduced in the present. This, in turn, allows for a diachronic identification of past and present laborers, which is characterized by a lack of change, a lack of narrativity, and therefore allows the past to become present. In this, the dual realms of material presence and laborious process come together.

"A Knife Blade Called Now"

It is a commonplace of narrativist and constructivist history to claim that the past and the present are irrevocably separated and that, indeed, the only purpose for the study

of history at all is to come to terms with the present. However, Swift's contrast of Atkinsonian progress and Crickian process indicates that the past and the present may not be as inviolably separate as some have theorized. Rather, the repetitiveness and circularity of process indicates that the past can be made present, allowing an access to the real that seems impossible according to models like White's. *Waterland* does not, however, finally settle on only one version of nonnarrative and the presence of the past. Rather, like de Certeau, Crick offers two version of the real. The first is that which lacks the capacity to spark narrative interest (the boring, the mundane, the quotidian, the every day) and reflects the process of the hard, inglorious labor of the Cricks. The second also denies narrative, but in a different fashion.

Although the correlation of the real with the repetitive and mundane process of daily labor is essential to the understanding of the theorization of historical representation in *Waterland*, it is not the only avenue of the real which the novel explores. Indeed, the concept of the real would have a limited usefulness if restricted to the depiction of only this type of activity. Through an alternative deployment of the concept of nonnarrative, however, it does become evident that *Waterland* offers an alternative real which, although difficult to access, also finds a way to permeate the "Here and Now" with a past that is made present.

The first indication that there is another real follows closely upon the first description of the Crickian reality in which the real is a “grey flat empty space” (17). Following this first definition of the real it is quite surprising, and indeed confusing, to find Crick assert only a few pages later that “Reality’s so strange and unexpected” (25), when we have just read how reality is what is completely expected, repetitive and lacking in narrative interest. Nevertheless, this countervailing trend in the definition of reality continues throughout the novel and becomes slightly more clear in the subsequent chapter, “A Bruise Upon a Bruise”(26-39), which takes place during Crick’s teen years on July 25, 1943. In this chapter, the body of Crick’s friend Freddie Parr is found in Henry Crick’s sluice and is fished out by Henry and his two sons, Thomas and Dick, with a boat-hook. In this extraordinary circumstance, seemingly the essence of narrativity, the process of Crickian pumping and drainage is repeated in a parodic form when Henry attempts to revive the long dead Freddie through the means of the “Holger-Nielsen Method of Artificial Respiration”: “For there is such a thing as human drainage too, such a thing as human pumping. And what else was my father doing on that July morning than what his forbears had been doing for generations; expelling water? But whereas they reclaimed land, my father could not reclaim a life” (32).

Indeed, whereas the repetitive and laborious process of drainage has been previously defined as the real itself, here Crick notes that *this* attempt at drainage is just the opposite: “Dad labours to refute reality, against the law of nature, that a dead thing does not live again” (32).²¹ The real here is not, however, merely the material presence of death itself, but is rather the extraordinary and dislocating event that makes one aware that one is not merely a part of a story or dream but is rather inexpressibly in “the present,” or what Crick later calls the “Here and Now.” It is not upon seeing the dead body of Freddie Parr that Crick experiences this sensation, but rather in the radically contingent and unsettling moment when the boat-hook catches under Freddie’s jaw and rips upwards through the cheek, eye-socket and temple while Freddie’s body drops back into the water and bursts forth with a new layer of blood which is “a dark, sticky, reluctant substance, the colour of black-currants’ (30). Here, as Crick relates, “I came out of a dream. [...] I realized I was looking at a dead body. Something I had never seen before” (30). It is this dislocating moment that allows Thomas to see the grim reality his father refutes in his efforts to pump the water out of Freddie. This reality is not merely the prospect of mortality, but the realization of one’s own existence outside of a scripted, easily explained Symbolic, a momentary sense of uniqueness and presence that is not

easily explained or narrativized and which gives the sense of one's own participation in the world, not merely as an observer.

Why did fear transfix me at that moment when the boat-hook clawed at Freddie Parr's half-slipping, half-suspended body? Because I saw death? Or the image of something worse? Because this wasn't just plain, ordinary, terrible, unlooked-for-death, but something more?

Children, evil isn't something that happens far off — it suddenly touches your arm. (35)

It is true that the reality of Freddie's body being pulled by the boat-hook is quickly subsumed by the needs of narration, as it is soon revealed that Dick is Freddie's murderer and that Mary and Tom must participate in the cover-up, triggering the second detective-story of the novel. However, while it is true that "the reality of things — be thankful — only visits us for a brief while" (33), it is also the case in *Waterland* that "history is a thin garment, easily punctured by a knife blade called Now" (36). While history in the novel is defined as the "reality obscuring drama" that converts that which causes unease and fear into comprehensible narrative that comforts and explains, it becomes clear that that which causes fear, the real (in this latter sense) can also, at times, intrude and puncture its narrativization. This intrusion or puncturing of narrative brings back the sense of the real, or the "Here and Now," even and especially where it is most actively suppressed, and repressed, during the course of narrativization.²²

It is here that, again, the novel's allegorization of psychoanalysis comes into play.

While psychoanalysis attempts to find integration and coherent narrativization of foundational and traumatic events in an effort to explain them and therefore to create a more healthy subjectivity, it is also the case that psychoanalytic theory posits the difficulty, and in some configurations, impossibility, of completely subsuming and reintegrating traumatic events into a coherent narrative or subjectivity. Indeed traumatic events are often those elements of the subject that resist symbolization and continue to “return” in different forms throughout the life narrative, never disappearing, yet never retaining a consistent symbolic value or place in the subject's life-narrative. The analyst's attempt to make the patient “healthy” then often comes, paradoxically, from the ability to explain the inexplicable, or to incorporate these traumatic moments into a coherent narrative. The Lacanian version of this traumatic moment is identified with the “Real” register and, as Žižek explains, resists even the most strenuous attempts to incorporate it into the symbolic.

According to Žižek, a traumatic event, like the fishing of Freddie Parr's body from the sluice,²³ is first experienced as inexplicable or beyond explanation, “when it [the event] erupts for the first time it is experienced as a contingent trauma, as an intrusion of a certain non-symbolized Real” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 61). While the

reoccurrence or repetition of such a traumatic occurrence (through memory, through retelling, through narrativization) allows it to “find its place in the symbolic network” (Zizek, *Sublime Object* 61), there is always some portion of that intrusion of the Real that remains unexplained, or, within the constellation of narratability, not narratable. It is this portion that retains its contingent non-symbolized status. As Zizek puts it, the capacity for a symbolic “retroactive modification of the past” has its limits, “it stumbles onto a rock upon which it becomes suspended . This rock is, of course, the Real, that which resists symbolization: the traumatic point which is always missed but none the less always returns, although we try [...] to neutralize it, to integrate it into the symbolic order” (Zizek, *Sublime Object* 69). Here, Zizek indicates that despite the power of the human capacity to explain or symbolize events, particularly traumatic events, there are elements of those events which, in fact, are not so easily incorporated into the symbolic and which inevitably resist our attempts to explain them.

Although Lacanian theory principally speaks of how subjectivity is constructed and not of historical and material reference,²⁴ this construction of the Real helps to conceptualize the reality that is proposed in *Waterland*. That is, where Lacanian thought provides a structural model for reading *Waterland*, it does not account fully for the novel’s insistence on material presence, arguing more frequently for its opposite as I

discuss in the previous chapter. In the case of *Waterland*, the extraction of Freddie Parr's body from the sluice, perhaps erroneously referred to as a dislocation above, provides a momentary location of Crick *outside* of symbolization and narrativization and, instead, in a material reality that is not part of the story of history, but is an indicator of material presence.

Such moments recur infrequently in *Waterland*, but they do recur and are given the name of the "Here and Now" by Price, a name soon adopted by Crick as well. Like Lacanian *jouissance*, the "Here and Now" brings both joy and terror and comes rarely (Swift 61), but, as Crick points out, it is these momentary encounters with the real of the "Here and Now" that prevent a completely constructivist view of history.

I believed, perhaps like you, that history was a myth. Until a series of encounters with the Here and Now gave a sudden pointedness to my studies. Until the Here and Now, gripping me by the arm, slapping my face and telling me to take a good look at the mess I was in, informed me that history was no invention but indeed existed — and I had become a part of it. (62)

While History in the upper case is referred to as "the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears in the dark," or the narratives and stories that fend off and explain the real, history in the lower case is here identified with the real itself, not an invented story, but a material presence that sparks fear and dis-ease rather than dispelling them.

Perhaps the most traumatic moment in the novel that represents the “Here and Now” in its most jarring and unsettling form is the abortion of Tom and Mary’s child. Nevertheless, even this encounter with the real is first introduced as a fairy-tale about the “witch,” Martha Clay, who lives in the cottage beyond Wash Fen Mere and “who also got rid of love-children” (298). In this instance, the difficulty of extracting the moment of the real is emphasized as Crick states, “all stories were once real. And all the events of history, the battles and costume-pieces, once really happened [...] were once feelings in the guts” (297). Likewise, however, all real events soon become stories, and the trauma of the real is soon incorporated into the fairy-tale of History and “when the world is about to end there’ll be no more reality, only stories” (298).

Certainly, the impulse to convert the real into a story is resisted by Crick in this case. As Crick says about the witch, “No pointed hat, no broomstick, no grinning black cat on shoulder” (301). Likewise, Crick emphasizes how the “reproduction” of a Fenland cottage like the Clay’s, available at the Fenland Museum of Gildsey, is not the same as their real home. At the same time, however, Crick finds himself slipping into storytelling mode and chastising himself for letting go of the real events. “But enough of Martha’s costume. (And enough of that smell!),” he admonishes himself. While Crick carries on his narratorial debate about the difficulty of separating the story of the events

of Mary's abortion and the reality of it, he simultaneously insists that there are some events that cannot be completely contained by the story in which they are embedded.

After Crick is sent outside to pluck a duck, while Martha performs the gruesome but necessary procedure of the abortion, he ventures over to the window to take a peek and witnesses the grotesque scene:

There are things which happen outside dreams which should only happen in them. A pipe — no, a piece of sedge, a length of hollow reed — is stuck into Mary's hole. The other end is in Martha's mouth. Crouching low, her head between Mary's gory knees, her eyes closed in concentration, Martha is sucking with all her might. Those cheeks — those blood-bag cheeks working like bellows. (308)

John Lloyd Marsden has pointed out the central role that this abortion scene plays in the novel as a representative of the "Here and Now" or, in the terms sketched out above, the real. Marsden links this scene with Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque and the consistent link, both here and throughout the novel, between the female body and the landscape, both of which are "pumped" for drainage (Marsden 136).²⁵ Marsden, however, goes further by claiming that although the Bakhtinian/Rabelaisian carnivalesque typically reestablishes "concrete corporeality," the Crickian version is not connected to the real, but is rather "a sophisticated evasion of reality" in that Crick consistently sees all elements of this carnivalesque episode as a means to "further the fatalistic and exculpatory metanarrative of his own past and, specifically, his complicity

in the death of his unborn child” (Marsden 137). In other words, Marsden sees Crick’s narrative impulse as overpowering, subjugating even what he himself calls an instance of the “Here and Now” to his own metanarrative, turning the real or history itself into his own story or narrative and turning the inexplicable into the explained.

While there is an element of truth to Marsden’s assessment of Crick, it is also the case that both Crick and the novel as a whole suggest that this moment exceeds the limits of narration, as a trauma that, although foundational in the narrative of the lives of Mary and Tom, and their mutual obsession with their lost child, also exceeds its role in those narratives. When Crick asserts that “there are things which happen outside dreams that should only happen in them,” he once again reflects Zizek’s analogizing of the “real” and the dream itself. As Zizek explains (interpreting Lacan’s *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*), the Lacanian Real is not that which awakens us from our fantasies or dreams, but is instead that fundamental traumatic part of our past reality that defines us and our real desires and “which announces itself in the terrifying dream” (Zizek, *Sublime Object* 45). In this context, as Crick observes, dreams are not a fantastic escape from reality, but are more real than reality itself in the sense that “reality” itself, as it is commonly defined, is our own Symbolic reimagining or narrativization of the traumatic “kernel” of our identity. “Reality is a fantasy-construction which enables us to mask the

Real of our desire” (Zizek, *Sublime Object* 45) and the trauma always exceeds the narrative it engenders to normalize it.²⁶ Although the fishing of Freddie Parr from the sluice is described as awakening from a dream, both of these encounters with the “Here and Now” are characterized by the movement between dreaming and waking, indicating the presence that traumatic encounters with the real have in both.

However, the correlation of the scene of Mary’s abortion and the real as such, goes beyond this momentary correlation of the event with an anti-narrative, or unsymbolizable, “dream” rather than narratable “reality.” Indeed the parallel Marsden draws between the pumping of the Fens and the extraction of the child from Mary via Martha Clay’s bellows is especially relevant here. It is important to recall that the process of siltation is linked to the novel’s notion of the real, particularly in its rejection of grand cataclysmic events that separate the present from the past and its embracing of the continuities between them. In this, there is an implicit claim that the past is accessible, not irremediably inscrutable, because of its continuities with the present. The traumatic unsymbolizable moment embodied in the extraction of Freddie Parr and the abortion does not share the idea of process with the drainage of the Fens, but as with this other strand of the real, it does serve to collapse the fundamental separation of present and past, and instead stresses how time is recursive, repetitive and cyclical, bringing the past into the

present, and vice versa, despite the fact that formal patterns of repetition and recursion are also disrupted by the novel.

This strange effect of the traumatic real, bringing together the present and the past is best illustrated during Tom's duck-plucking outside the Clay cottage:

His head starts to spin. The duck he's holding in his hand isn't a duck, it's a hen. He's sitting in the sunny space between a chicken coop and the kitchen door, where Mother stands, in her apron. But the hen's not dead, it's still alive. Its wings start to flap and it starts to lay eggs. [...] A copious unending stream of eggs, so many that he has to collect them with the help of his mother and her apron. But Mother says they're not really eggs, they're fallen stars. And so they are, twinkling and winking on the ground. We carry the fallen stars into the chicken coop. Which isn't a chicken coop at all. It's the shell of the old wooden windmill by the Hockwell Lode. And Mary's inside lying naked with her knees up. Mother discreetly retires. And Mary starts to explain about her menstrual cycle and about the wonders inside her hole and how babies get to be born. She says, "I've got eggs, you know." And he, ignorant but eager to learn, says, "What like hens?" And Mary laughs. And then she screams and then she says she's the mother of God — I drop the duck I'm holding (it's a duck after all). It's not a dream. What you wake up into can't be a dream. It's dark. I'm here; it's now. I'm sitting [...] on a bench outside a cottage where Martha Clay, a reputed witch ... (307-8)

This passage entails not only the merging of reality and dream, particularly in the literalization of his mother's metaphorical transformation of chicken eggs into fallen stars, but also of the past and present. Specifically, the present plucking of the duck is transformed into the childhood plucking of the hen, while the hen's eggs are transformed into the eggs of Mary during their mutual exploration of "holes and things" at the Hockwell Lode during their teen years. This is, in turn, transformed into the obvious

religious iconography of the novel, with Mary as the mother of God and Dick as the parodic “Savior of the World.” This iconography is further crystallized by the oaths Mary swears while the abortion is being carried out ““HolyMaryMotherofGodHolyMaryMotherofGodHolyMaryMotherof—”(308).

Waterland then indicates how, on a broader scale, lived experience is recursive and repetitive, repeating and reliving foundational trauma and unconsciously revisiting the past in the present. Tom and Mary’s experience of losing a child recurs often in their later lives, as they obsessively seek out and obtain child substitutes in various attempts to cover over this trauma. Price, their dog, and the kidnapped supermarket baby all, at various times, fulfill this symbolic role. What this passage indicates, however, is how both Tom and Mary are obsessed with the symbolic significance of reproduction long before their own child is aborted, and how this traumatic moment of an encounter with the real, that exceeds their mutual capability to explain or narrativize the experience takes them both into their past (the eggs of the mother and their sexual curiosity at Hockwell Lode) and into their future. This passage lends weight to Crick’s earlier theorizing about history in which he claims: “It goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours. Do not fall into the illusion that history is a

well-disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future [...] how does a man move? One step forward, one step back” (135).

While the future is often configured as a land of hope and prospective Utopian paradise, as Crick himself explains to the class in discussing the motivations behind the French Revolution, it is during this encounter with the real that Crick offers the alternative to this idealistic teleological vision of the future. When Crick receives the remains of the aborted fetus in a pail from Martha Clay, he observes, “In the pail is what the future is made of. I rush out again to be sick” (308). Here the future is not a place of prospective improvement or progress, but is dead, aborted, indeed, by the preceding generation in much the same way that Isa experiences her life as “abortive” in *Between the Acts*.

Throughout *Waterland*, Crick insists on his belief in the future, in children, if not to progress towards a Utopian paradise, then to, at least, not allow things to get any worse and to maintain the world as it is. The prospect of a lifeless future as symbolized by the aborted fetus of Crick’s child makes him sick and instills him with fear, just as the notion of the “End of the World” and a futureless existence triggers the nightmares of his students who form the Holocaust Club to share their fears of the end of the world. Here, again, the notion of anti-narrative is useful. Where narrative, in the novel, is consistently

tied to the soothing of fears and the use of explanation to quell inquietude, these moments of traumatic fright seem to exceed the possibility of narrative. In Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*, he echoes the Benjaminian notion that the aim of all narrative is the explanation of death, an explanation which we cannot have in lived experience.

Likewise, the end of narration is, metaphorically, death itself, the cessation of narrative desire and the "terminal quiescence of the end" (Brooks 103). Brooks contends, via the Freudian notion of the death drive, that narrative desire is, in fact, the desire for an explanation of the plot that can only come once it is completed and narrative quiescence, or metaphorical death, is achieved. At the same time, however, he also suggests that the explanation that narrative gives is only accomplished through the ways that the narrative middle, or the plot, is realized by the final narrative foreclosure of the conclusion. Here, *Waterland* suggests again that the trajectory of nonnarratable-narratable-nonnarratable is false in its banishment of death to a realm where it serves only as satisfactory explanation of life itself. Through the medium of the unsymbolizable traumatic moment of fear, the novel asserts that the real of death, the anti-narrative that cannot be explained by narrative, cannot be controlled so easily and is, in fact, a signifier of the difficulty of repressing the truth, that the future for each of us *is* a radically contingent death that may not have an explanation or fit neatly into a life story. Where we have seen that the

nonnarratable in *Waterland* is, at times, an expression of that which has traditionally held no narrative interest (the daily drudgery of working-class labor), we can also see that in the form of anti-narrative, nonnarrative is also that which exceeds narrative's capacity to explain or allay fears, especially the fear of death. In Brooks's Freudian terms, the nonnarrative is found then both in the failure to incite the pleasure principle and in the realization of the death drive.

This reference to theories of Freudian desire brings us back to Dick Crick and one final example of what his half-brother identifies as “the Here and Now,” the real that denies the radical relativism of constructivist historiography: “There's something about this scene. It's tense with the present tense. It's fraught with the here and now, it's laden with this stuff—is there a name for it? [...] a feeling in the guts...” (207). The scene referred to here is not the abortion of his prospective child, but refers to a time even further back in Crick's life-story, when Mary Metcalf, after already removing her blouse, offers to remove her knickers if the five boys present (Tom and Dick Crick, Freddie Parr, and the largely irrelevant Peter Baine and Terry Coe) reveal their “swellings” first. While this episode seems to be insignificant, detailing, as the chapter title indicates, “Child's Play,” it retains, for Crick, a connection to the traumatic real, the “here and now” which is less clearly evident than that of the abortion scene. Once again, however,

the novel's appropriation and parody of Freudian psychoanalysis makes the importance accorded to this episode more clear.

The prospect of the revelation of five penises, one of them preternaturally huge, once again pulls the novel into the discourse of psychoanalysis. Both Freud and Lacan, of course, attribute much symbolic freight to the penis (or phallus) and its centrality in the oedipal triangle. In particular, the phallus is that which replaces the originary connection to the mother for the Oedipal child, and as such, in the Lacanian linguistic adaptation, signifies both meaning and its lack. The phallus represents for Lacan, the Law of the Father, the entry into the world of language and meaning and "the Symbolic register" as such. Again, however, although the Symbolic register allows entry into the social world characterized by the interchange of signs and language, it is also, despite its association with the phallus, a "castration" of sorts. The castration is symbolic in that the phallus represents the lack of plenitude or identity between signifier and signified that is part of the Imaginary register, or the fantasy of unblemished identity between the self and the mother before the Law of the Father intrudes.

For Lacan, of course, much of this is an allegory of linguistic understanding and although the phallus or Symbolic register is necessary to allow for social interaction it is not connected to the real as such: "it can never have any *direct* access to reality, in

particular to the now prohibited body of the mother. It has been banished from this ‘full,’ imaginary possession into the ‘empty’ world of language” (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 145). As such, the phallus represents a movement beyond the fantasy of transparent meaning and referentiality, but it also avoids the Real of the unsymbolizable or that which cannot be contained within reality as defined solely by discourse, culture, and language. As Žižek notes, “the phallus is not simply lost but is an object which *gives body to a certain fundamental loss in its very presence. In the phallus, loss as such attains a positive existence*” (*Sublime Object* 157; emphasis in original). As Žižek points out, the meaning or wholeness that the phallus represents is already a fetish, covering the lack of meaning and wholeness that was imagined as part of the originary connection to the mother. The phallus is the first signifier in a chain that attempts to replace this originary wholeness, while the recognition of this failure is access to the Real.

Although there is nothing in *Waterland* to assume a specific reference to Lacanian thought, there is clearly a use of, manipulation, and parody of Freudian psychoanalysis that is similarly pre-occupied with the importance of the penis or phallus as the site of symbolic importance, especially in such constructions as “castration anxiety” and “penis envy.” This is particularly evident in the scene near the Hockwell Lode in which Mary Metcalf offers to reveal her “hole,” to borrow the vernacular of the novel, if the boys

show their “things.” In this scene, the phallus takes on an extremely important role as it is revealed that Dick himself has a gargantuan penis that strains at the limits of his swimming trunks at the sight of Mary’s exposed upper body. While the other boys expose themselves readily in anticipation of Mary doing the same, Dick withholds from doing so until Mary declares that she will only reveal herself to one boy, the one who can swim the furthest underwater.

Dick’s late entry and triumphant victory in the competition promises the revelation of the huge phallus which has stimulated such curiosity in Mary and, by this time, the reader as well. This curiosity, however, meets disappointment, as Dick’s huge erection has disappeared during his swim, as the “swellings” of the other boys did, under Mary’s inspection: “as Dick draws near us something is evident, or evident by its absence. The monstrous swelling, that trapped baton — he no longer pushes it before him. It is gone — or sunk” (190). As we have seen, Dick is symbolic of a failed teleological narrativism derived from Freudian-based psychoanalysis, and again here, while Dick’s startling tumescence seems at first to be loaded with meaning and presence, it is instead characterized by absence itself. Like the Lacanian phallus, Dick here symbolizes the impossibility of complete fulfillment, both of sexual and of linguistic and narrative desire: the desire for a total narrative, as well as linguistic transparency and

referentiality. If, as Peter Brooks writes, we should see “the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest,” Dick’s rapid de-tumescence indicates the novel’s interest in the nonnarratable, or the foiling of traditional narrative interest. Dick’s failure to fulfill his sexual and narrative promise is again indicated later in the novel, when it is revealed that despite his prodigious size, he is, in practice, impotent, because he is “too big” (259-264) to have completed the sexual act with Mary and, therefore, to be the father of Mary’s child. While Dick’s phallic significance is suggested and frustrated during the contest at the Hockwell Lode, when the materiality of his unnaturally large penis is finally revealed, it does not hold the almost magical power nor symbolic significance that the readers expect, and for which Mary hopes.

None of this, however, completely explains why this scene is, as Crick asserts, “tense with the present tense.” It is not, at least not completely, the presence of Dick, nor the revelation and withdrawal of his symbolic phallus. Rather, when Crick makes this claim, he explicitly refers to the embarrassment of his own penis (and those of Freddie, Peter and Terry) which “droop so plaintively” upon inspection (207). While Crick, typically, does offer an explanation or two for his failure to rise to the occasion (his love for Mary, “a common response, referred to by the best sexologists”), it is clear that there is no symbolic weight or significance attached to the pedestrian phalluses of the four real

boys. Dick is, to a large degree, a byproduct of narrative excess and his hypernarratability is further compressed into the seemingly hefty significance of his own phallus. On the other hand, Freddie, Tom, Peter and Terry are unremarkable products of the Fens whose penises are similarly unremarkable, “Four wrinkled irresolute and slightly sticky members revealed, amidst nests of incipient pubic hair; which attempt to stand up, go limp and stir again feebly” (184). While Mary’s sexual curiosity and the reader’s narrative desire are piqued by the contest, what is finally revealed, and not revealed in the cases of Mary and Dick, suggests a parallel to the comparison of the historical Cricks and the Atkinsons. What is real here is not the satisfaction of narrative desire or the demands of narratability, but the impossibility of realizing that desire, an impossibility signified here by the phallus itself. As Crick himself points out, it is at this moment of encounter with the real that he, once more, “escapes to his story-books,” which for him are always historical but paradoxically provide him with a buffer from his real experience.

Curiosity

The sexual curiosity that Mary displays at the Hockwell Lode closely parallels the narrative curiosity of Crick in his attempt to discover the truth behind the murder of Freddie Parr. Both locate Dick as their object and both partake of a Freudian logic of

narrative desire like that of Peter Brooks. While curiosity is the condition necessary for narrative desire and provides therefore, for Brooks, the basis for plot itself, *Waterland* offers both the withdrawal of curiosity and an alternative model of curiosity as a means to escape the narratable and to, in some fashion, access the real.

The sexual curiosity of Tom and Mary is specifically analogized in the novel with that curiosity that leads to the construction of narratives that attempt to explain.

“Curiosity drove her [Mary], beyond all restraint to want to touch, witness, experience whatever was unknown and hidden from her. [...] Curiosity, which bogs us down in arduous meditations and can lead to the writing of history books, will also, on occasion [...] reveal to us that which we seldom glimpse unscathed [...] the Here and Now” (51).

While this curiosity is sparked in Tom and Mary’s secret liaisons by the windmill and can lead to an unexpected glimpse of the “Here and Now,” its excessive exploration can also lead to the satisfaction of that curiosity, the revelation of all secrets that simulates the “death drive” or the terminal quiescence that the end of narrative indicates. In this case, “everything is open, everything is plain: there are no secrets, here, now, in this nothing-landscape” (52). Mary’s tendency to want to share everything with Tom and to satisfy all curiosities, even the secrets of her monthly bleedings, is analogized to the Fens

themselves in which everything is flat and open to inspection, “the wide empty spaces of reality” (17), which are, in turn, associated with the real, the “here, now.”

Still, while the satisfaction, or cessation, of Tom’s sexual desire and, it seems, narrative curiosity are postulated here and given the privileged epistemological position of the “Here and Now” or the real, this is not the novel’s final word on curiosity.

Common theorizations of narrative desire like Brooks’s are built heavily on Freudian psychoanalysis which takes masculine desire as its model.²⁷ *Waterland*, on the other hand, suggests that there are other models of curiosity and desire which might be more useful in understanding and expressing history itself and more closely accessing the real, allowing a glimpse of the real through desire itself, rather than its nonnarratable lack. Crick even goes so far as to imply that the desire for traditional historical narrative is not a “natural” urge or curiosity but rather obscures and deforms the type of curiosity that *is* natural, the type that would allow people to “make history” rather than write it:

Supposing it’s revolutions which divert and impede the course of our inborn curiosity. Supposing it’s curiosity — which insures our sexual explorations and feeds our desire to hear and tell stories — which is our natural and fundamental condition. Supposing it’s our insatiable and feverish desire to know about things, to know about each other, always to be sniff-sniffing things out, which is the true and rightful subverter and defeats even our impulse for historical progression. Have you ever considered that why so many historical movements, not only revolutionary ones, fail, fail at heart is because they fail to take account of the complex and unpredictable forms of our curiosity? Which doesn’t want to push ahead, which always wants to say, Hey, that’s interesting, let’s stop awhile, let’s take a look-see, let’s retrace — let’s take a different turn? What’s the hurry? What’s the rush? Let’s *explore*. (194; emphasis in original)²⁸

Here Crick echoes the many feminist narrative theorists who see the Brooksonian model of narrative desire as reductive and limiting. French Lacanian feminists like Irigaray and Cixous point out how traditional narratives that seem to follow this model express only a masculine point of view and a masculine desire and that therefore a disruption of this type of narrative is necessary through transgressive narrative strategies. Other critics, like Robyn Warhol, Susan Winnett, and Marilyn Farwell point out that it is perhaps not traditional narrative itself that needs to be subverted, but theories of narrative desire, like Brooks's, because they only account for one type of desire as the engine behind traditional narratives. In discussing women's viewing of soap operas, Warhol invokes the possibility that all desire in narrative is not and cannot be defined by the death drive that defines narrative satisfaction by the realization or conclusion of a story that helps to define and explain everything that has led up to it. The Freudian model privileges the conclusion as analogous to the "death" of the orgasm that justifies and explains all of the foreplay that leads up to it. Instead, Warhol points out that, in viewing soap operas, no end is wanted or needed and that narrative desire is sustained by the desire for a continuous deferral or avoidance of conclusion and replaced by "narrative climax after narrative climax" (353). Winnett, likewise, points out the shortcomings of Brooks's theory by pointing out how a novel like *Frankenstein* fails to come to the death

of the creature and how it illustrates a different version of the “incipience, repetition, and closure” central to Brooks’s theory, but this time based on a female biological model.

While it has been convincingly argued that linearity or chronological, proleptic narratives do not necessarily have an identifiable ideological valence (Richardson, *Linearity and Its Discontents*), it is clear that a theory of narrative that claims that all traditional narratives reflect a Freudian psychoanalytic, and therefore masculine, model may limit the possibilities of narrative itself, or may place narrative itself into a category that cannot account for important texts, ideas, and quite possibly, truths. This may, to some degree, account for Stone’s definition of narrative that cites linearity, coherence, and closure as central to the definition of historical narrative. While it is this kind of historical narrative that Crick, at times, advocates in his attempts to quell the fear and inquietude associated with the real, the novel also positions the progressive linear narrative associated with the Atkinsons as a departure from an accurate presentation of reality, with the nonnarratable, circular and repetitive process of drainage associated with the Cricks given epistemological privilege. That is, while the novel appropriates and deploys Freudian psychoanalysis, it questions the efficacy of this model of narrative desire in the representation of the past.

In his advocacy of a different kind of curiosity, Crick deviates from his previous alliance with linear narrative, promoting a curiosity and a storytelling that is “complex and unpredictable,” that does not “push ahead” or progress in some linear manner, but which rather strays off course and investigates all of the potential of curiosity, beyond a drive that desires only completion and explanation. Like the feminist critics who see the Brooksonian model of narrative as limiting, Crick here argues for what might be considered a “deviant” or “perverse” desire in the historical field, a desire not for one story, but for many explorations. Crick’s model for this different kind of desire is the “natural history” of the search for the origins of *anguilla anguilla* or the common eel, one of which Freddie Parr drops in Mary’s knickers following the swimming contest.

Swift’s own radical deviation from his central plot of the Crick family history, Tom and Mary’s romance, and the firing of Crick to tell the origin of the European and American eel is, to some degree, a model of the tangential curiosity that he advocates. Likewise, what Crick discovers about the eels is also proffered as a possible alternative to traditional narrative desire. As Crick explains, the journey of the eels from Europe to the Sargasso Sea and back again is “more mysterious, more impenetrable perhaps than the composition of the atom” (204), in its accomplishment of “vast atavistic circles” (204). A contrast is once again offered here between the inexplicable, unsymbolizable, and

circular and the linear, progressive, and explicable with the latter seeking conclusions while the former merely pursues curiosity for its own sake. It is the result of this alternative curiosity that Crick comes to call “natural history” (205) as opposed to the “artificial history” of traditional historical narration. For Crick, traditional historical narration is tied to the linear progression of grand, cataclysmic, and revolutionary events and the search for “Reality. Reality made plain. Reality with no nonsense. Reality cut down to size. Reality minus a few heads” (206). What Crick suggests here, however, is that the reality that reduces, eliminates nonsense, and cuts things down to size is the opposite of the real as it has been defined throughout the novel: the quotidian, the unsymbolizable trauma, and the “unsolved mysteries of mysteries” like the mating pattern of the eels.

Reproduction, Representation, and the Reality of the Real

As in Chapter One, my deployment of Lacanian theory implies an affiliation with the element of poststructural thought that denies access to truth and reality. However, although *Waterland*, like Lacan, explores the ramifications of Freudian theory displaced to the linguistic and discursive realm, it employs a similar model to make a very different point. That is, where Lacan insists that his register of the Real in no way refers to the

plenitude of truth or meaning, in Swift's novel its parallel, the "Here and Now" does, at the very least, refer specifically to the material past.²⁹ In this, *Waterland* parallels Slavoj Zizek's manipulation and transformation of Lacanian thought into a discourse about class struggle. Zizek takes the commonly held Lacanian denial of referentiality and insists that, unlike much poststructuralist theory, it paradoxically *does* refer not only to materiality but to truth as well. Swift's novel importantly performs a similar operation.

Terry Eagleton provides a fairly standard account of Lacanian thought and, in doing so, implies a Marxist critique of Lacan's relativism.

With the entry of the father, the child is plunged into post-structuralist anxiety. It now has to grasp Saussure's point that identities come about only as a result of difference. [...] Language is 'empty' because it is just an endless process of difference and absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child now will simply move from one signifier to another, along a linguistic chain, which is potentially infinite." (*Literary Theory* 144-5)

Eagleton's explanation describes a child's entry into the world of the Symbolic, or that of language and discourse, and although this is crucial to understanding Lacan, what makes Lacanian thought congenial to Zizek's class politics, as well as my own claims about the reading of *Waterland*, is the dimension of the Real. It is here that Zizek's insistence on the separation of Lacan from Derrida and other poststructuralist thinkers squarely resides.

Zizek argues that "post-structuralism" claims that truth, in some sense, does not exist, that in fact "truth itself is finally reduced to one of the style effects of the discursive

articulation” (Zizek, *Sublime Object* 153). This, indeed, is precisely Hayden White’s argument in “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in which he argues that historical reality, as we perceive it, is generated, not reflected, by the form of narrative. From this perspective, discursive formations create what we perceive as truth and there can be no metaphysical or material way to access a truth beyond discourse, or a metalanguage that has access to truth. On the other hand, Zizek’s Lacan allows for a truth beyond discourse, even if that truth is unsymbolizable or cannot be fully accessed or occupied. It is this truth itself, Zizek argues, that constitutes the Real. In fact, Zizek argues that the possibility, if not the actuality, of a metaphysical Truth or metalanguage is, precisely, the Real itself. He argues that, contrary to poststructuralist thought, “Metalanguage is not just an Imaginary entity. It is *Real* in the strict Lacanian sense—that is, it is impossible to *occupy* its position. But Lacan adds, it is even more difficult simply to *avoid* it. One cannot *attain* it, but one can also not *escape* it” (Zizek, *Sublime Object* 156-7; emphasis in original). It is this sense that although the truth (or reality itself) cannot be truly occupied in all of its plenitude, it also cannot be completely banished to the realm of discourse. Rather, it, like the psychoanalytically repressed, always returns, a reading that is evocative and instructive for *Waterland*’s theorization of history.

In *Waterland*, the narratable, or at least narrative itself serves the role of the Lacanian Symbolic. It allows Crick, Mary, and even Crick's students a framework for comprehending their lives, comforting them and allowing them to move forward. As Crick asserts, History is the telling of stories, "the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears in the dark" (62). However, despite the therapeutic effects of storytelling (whether historical or fictional), the construction of teleological, coherent and comprehensive narratives out of the random detritus of daily existence is seen to be, at best, misleading ("the reality-obscuring drama"), and at worst, physically and emotionally damaging. This is clearest in the incestuous creation of Dick, which positions him at the end of the teleological narrative of Christianity as "The Savior of the World." This theological and teleological narrative is parodically undermined in the character of Dick himself and is tragically concluded when Dick discovers the truth of his origins, kills Freddie Parr and, eventually, himself. Likewise, Mary spends much of her life trying to face and deal with the reality of her lost child and the deaths of Dick and Freddie, but she eventually succumbs to the lure of the symbolic or the potential teleological narrative of her own life, when she decides that God has touched her to become a second "Mary," a mother without becoming pregnant. Unfortunately, she must kidnap a baby from the supermarket in order to fulfill that narrative.

Mary's impulse to subsume the traumatic real of her aborted child within a symbolic narration is, the novel suggests, the universal human condition, the impulse to answer the question "why?" by creating a story to explain events, but this impulse, while being comforting, is also dangerous. Mary is, for much of her marriage, brave enough to face the reality of her lost child and "did not believe any more in miracles and fairy-tales nor [...] in New Life and Salvation" (127). Crick, on the other hand, has a tendency to need the escape of stories and storytelling. It is Tom who leans on Mary in facing their mutual trauma, not the reverse. Indeed, while Tom is forever attempting to replace the lost child with his students, she "made do [...] with nothing [...]. To withstand, behind all the stage-props of their marriage, the empty space of reality" (126) and refuses to adopt because "to adopt a child is not the real thing" (127). This acceptance of the real and the facing of the truism that "you cannot dispose of the past" (126) is, however, finally too much for Mary to bear as she turns towards one of the most tried and true of teleological metanarratives, that of religion, and adopts the role of the metaphorical mother of God that her name suggests. Here, Mary withdraws from the real of her traumatic past or, more precisely, engulfs it in symbolic narration, rather than facing it. All of this suggests that she does have a choice, not between an infinite amount of textual significations, but between an engagement with the real and a departure from it.

This sense that the real can, and should, be accessed through the rejection of traditional narration as the mode of historical discourse is explored in varying ways throughout the novel, whether it be the epistemological privileging of the quotidian process of land drainage over the narratable grand events of the rise of the Atkinsons, or the insistence on the presence of traumatic anti-narrative events that exceed narrative's capacity to contain them. In either case, however, the novel points to the ways in which the past and the present are not necessarily inviolably separate, but how circular processes and repetition allow the past to recur in the present, as traumatic occurrences allow not only for a return of the repressed, but also for a return of the referent of the past itself, a past that cannot be subsumed by retroactive narrativization and becomes present in the "Here and Now." While Hayden White rejects traditional narrative historical storytelling by arguing that "the historian serves no one well by constructing a specious continuity between the present world and that which preceded it" ("Burden of History" 50), Swift's novel offers the contrary possibility that there may be continuities between the present and the past not accounted for by traditional narrative or by chronological connection.

It is worthwhile here to recall that Hayden White's relativism is not forwarded out of an expressed desire to obliterate the historical profession or to destroy any confidence

we may have in historical representation. Rather, he objects to narrative in order to argue for a transformation of historical discourse away from traditional “realistic” narrative, and towards the use of “surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography” (“Burden of History” 43), including historical representation that “plunder(s) psychoanalysis, cybernetics, game theory, and the rest” (47). *Waterland*, like many modernist and postmodernist novels, is characterized stylistically by its rejection of linear, realistic narrative and its embrace of recursive, circular, self-reflexive and heavily subjective narration.³⁰ Again, White’s argument is made in an effort to push historiography towards displaying its limits and, perhaps, its ultimate futility, while simultaneously fulfilling its potential for metaphorical richness. *Waterland*, on the other hand, makes similar arguments against traditional narrative while insisting on the referential possibilities for a new kind of historical discourse.

Particularly through the deployment of the story of the Atkinsons and its contrast with the non-story of the Cricks and through the advocacy of alternative types of curiosity not aimed at narrative fulfillment, *Waterland* suggests that these recursive, circular and repetitive narrative techniques are a means of accessing the real itself, the anti-narrative and the nonnarratable, not a merely formal exercise that demonstrates metaphorical richness. Indeed, where postmodernism is often associated with the

linguistic play and reflexivity suggested by White and where *Waterland* is most frequently identified as a postmodern novel in its analogizing of story and history, the evidence of the novel suggests otherwise. Despite a decidedly vexed and difficult struggle with the theory and significance of history, *Waterland*, like *Between the Acts*, insists that there is a material real to be had in the past and that it is possible, if not easy, to access it through the nonnarrative representation.

None of this is to suggest that *Waterland* advocates the elimination of narrative itself from our history, or from our lives. First, the definition of narrative that allies it with linearity, teleology, and explanation, is shown to be somewhat restrictive by novels like *Waterland*. That is, if the definition of narrative were expanded somewhat, particularly to include alternative models of narrative desire, narrative's capacity to access the real might improve.

More, importantly, however, Crick's continual assertion that history and storytelling are necessary human means of coping with trauma and dispelling "fears of the dark," should not be dismissed as merely fetishistic disavowals of the real. Rather, as Dominick LaCapra has discussed thoroughly, it is not an effective means of dealing with the world to allow trauma to remain unnarrativized, or in its original state. Rather, as LaCapra points out, if trauma is not dealt with, it is often "repeated": "scenes in which

the past returns and the future is blocked out fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 21). While “repetition” is one means in which the past returns, Freud recommends two additional steps, “remembering” and “working through” and LaCapra echoes these recommendations. Certainly, “working through,” as constituted by the Freudian “talking cure,” almost inevitably involves the narrativizing of traumatic moments,³¹ a process that both White and Swift warn against as a possible erasure of materiality and the real. At the same time, however, Crick *does* advocate storytelling as a necessary protection against the threat of the vertigo not only of meaninglessness, but also of the too painful possibility of the real itself. While Mary appears at first to be something of an existential hero in her ability to face her trauma with no compensatory narrative to replace it, the “presence” of her past proves too much for her to cope with and she must replace it with *something* or go mad.

In this, LaCapra’s warning against an overly enthusiastic embrace of trauma or the sublime unsymbolizable moment is instructive. “One can [...] recognize the role of untranscendable structural trauma without rashly rendering its role in hyperbolic terms” (*Writing History* 77). Here LaCapra acknowledges the necessity of acknowledging the existence of what he calls sublime moments of traumatic encounters with the real, but also asserts the importance of not allowing those moments to dominate and define our

encounter with the past, as they do within the models of several theorists.³² Instead he points to the importance of “working through” as an important means of encountering the past and dealing with trauma.

Conversely, however, Žižek’s insistence that the entering of the Symbolic that “working through” represents should not allow for the erasure of the real, or the complete incorporation of the traumatic past into a symbolizable and therapeutic representation. Indeed, the access to reality that trauma represents is paradoxically acknowledged by Hayden White himself who, when faced with the trauma of the Holocaust, cannot quite bring himself to apply his own radically constructivist theory of historiography. As LaCapra notes, White usually takes the position that “a historian could choose to plot any series of (inherently meaningless or chaotic) events with any given plot structure or mode”(17-18). However, when faced with the Holocaust, White, in his “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth” reverses fields by offering: “In the case of the events of Third Reich in a ‘comic’ or ‘pastoral’ mode, we would be eminently justified in appealing to ‘the facts’ in order to dismiss it from the lists of ‘competing narratives’ of the Third Reich” (40).³³ Although White is well known for his claims to the contrary, here he acknowledges that there is something about the facts, the material reality, of the Holocaust, that prevents an emplotment free of certain parameters. The access to the

real, represented by trauma, becomes increasingly clear, as even White acknowledges the impossibility of a completely constructivist approach to such events.

Swift's novel insists both on LaCapra's warning against the valorization of the sublime *and* on Žižek's injunction against the erasure of the real through symbolization. *Waterland* continually refers to the important therapeutic power of narrative and how narrative, storytelling, and history stave off madness and allow one to live in the world. At the same time, both Crick as narrator and Swift as novelist point to the presence of the real in the past and the possibility of accessing it in the present. That the real is not solely occupied by trauma in the novel, but also by the quotidian enterprise of daily labor also indicates that while narrative has a tendency to deform the real to meet its requirements, there may be more than one means of moving beyond those demands and locating the reality of the past. Indeed, what is suggested by the novel is that a dialectic exists between the real and its narrativization.

When Crick tells his students, "I believed, perhaps like you, that history was a myth. Until a series of encounters with the Here and Now gave a sudden pointedness to my studies," (62) he highlights how the real of the Here and Now indicates how history, while arguably just another story, is *also* a representation of the materiality of past events that touched lives like his. It takes a series of traumatic encounters (the floating Freddie

Parr, Mary's abortion) for Crick to realize that somewhere within, or behind, the narration of history is a glimpse of reality itself. Likewise, Crick indicates the interdependence and inextricability of story and reality when he offers, "First it was a story — what our parents told us, at bedtime. Then it becomes real, then it becomes here and now. Then it becomes a story again" (328). Although here Crick cleverly inverts the normal materialist assessment of the relationship between the real and its symbolization by claiming that the story comes first there is not here a claim that materiality is inaccessible or invisible, it rather lies at the heart of its transformation from and into storytelling. This sense is compounded when Crick continues by saying, "First there is nothing; then there is happening. And after the happening, only the telling of it. But sometimes the happening won't stop and let itself be turned into a memory" (329). Here, Crick shifts the primacy to his two versions of the real (nothing and happening), while the telling takes a tertiary role. Even so, once again, the insistence that there are some events, traumatic events, that are not so easily banished to the past and transformed into notoriously untrustworthy memory. That memory briefly takes center stage in a novel obsessed with history again emphasizes what was clear in *Maus* and *The Book*, that these two poles of the past are more similar than different.

Indeed, as Richard Terdiman notes in his study of memory in the modern age, there is a continuous tension and balance between memory as “*the absolute reproduction of unchanging contents*” and memory as the “*mobile representation of contents transformed*” (288; emphasis in original). *Waterland* asserts that the same is true of history, as it alternates between these extremes: the reproduction of traumatic events that retain their presence despite being past, and the re-presentation of stories of the past as a therapeutic salve for the lack of meaning in the present. Constructivist historiography in the mode of Hayden White maintains only one half of this dialectic, asserting that history is *all* representation and no reproduction. This assertion denies any access to the real. *Waterland*, despite its common labeling as a postmodern novel that reproduces the concerns of constructivist historiography, rather insists that both sides of this dialectic be maintained, asserting the possibility of nonnarrative encounters with the real, even within a broader narrative. While it is certainly true that the novel makes what might seem like a contradictory effort to symbolize the unsymbolizable, to narrate the nonnarratable, and therefore proves the impossibility of such encounters, it is also true that *Waterland* insists on the possibility of reproduction and (even) repetition of past events along with their representation, and that the two are inextricable.

Likewise, Swift's novel, in addition to its claims about the unsymbolizably real nature of trauma, points to the political ramifications of an over-reliance on narratability by contrasting the imperialist, narratable Atkinsons with the working class reality of the Cricks. In doing so, *Waterland* asserts the ways in which these theoretical discussions of the narrativity of the past go beyond theory and have important ramifications for how we deal with the present, particularly in dealing with class struggle. Certainly, the transformation of the real into narratives and the assumption that these narratives are, transparently, the real itself, may have significant social and political ramifications, but the erasure of the past, as such, by asserting that our view of it is purely narration is equally dangerous. *Waterland* shows that it is necessary to see history as both reproduction and representation, even if we must look beyond the confines of traditional narrative to locate the real.

Notes

¹ It is no coincidence that Price shares a name with the British preacher who delivered one of the opening salvos in the French Revolution "pamphlet wars." The French Revolution is the subject of Crick's lessons throughout the novel and provides the occasion for many of his speculations about the nature of history.

² This parallel is indicated explicitly in the novel in several places. In Chapter Twenty, for instance, Crick reveals his "pedagogic panic" that he will teach them about revolution and there will be "revolt in the classroom" against his own authoritarian rule (163-67).

³ Many studies of the novel and Swift's novels in general *do* allow that Swift searches for some kind of access to the "real," although most continue to assert the relativism and postmodernist leanings of the novel (Cooper's and Irish's work fall into

this category). Brewer and Tillyard's "History and Telling Stories" takes Swift to task for his adherence to the "rather extravagant claims [of postmodernist representation] of much modern literature" and his analogization of fiction and history. George Landow's "History, His Story, and Stories" demonstrates how the novel posits "reality" as that which cannot be shaped or narrated and therefore demonstrates the aporia or inevitable failure of historical representation in claiming that the novel shows how "the material of stories often refuses to be shaped by them" (202). Although my claim has similarities to Landow's, I will more explicitly show how narration or "storytelling" is offered as that which cannot access reality, but that there are other means available to us to come in contact with the real. For an interesting look, complementary to my own, at how Swift's work dramatizes the pursuit of the real as opposed to the radical relativism of postmodern representation, see Frederick M. Holmes's "The Representation of History as Plastic: The Search for the Real Thing in Graham Swift's *Ever After*."

⁴ Miller does provide for the possibility of a new desire being introduced, or a narratable leftover, something I take up in relation to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in Chapter Three.

⁵ See Carr's *Time, Narrative and History*, as well as "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity," in Fay, Pomper and Vann for a phenomenological argument asserting that narrative and materiality are not inviolably separate, but are rather inextricable. For Carr, narrative itself is inherent and essential to human subjectivity and human existence not merely as a comfort, as Crick suggests here, but as one of, if not the only, primary means of explaining, internalizing, and dealing with existence. Stories, to Carr, are not merely written or spoken after events occur, as White and others suggest, but are constructed prior to and during lived experience. Life is, in fact, experienced as a series of chronologically overlapping narratives, according to Carr. For more on this perspective, see Chapter One.

⁶ For a brief discussion of how *Waterland* appropriates and parodies Victorian narratives of progress through the Atkinsons, see Landow 204-5. My own, more extended, discussion follows.

⁷ The entire chapter, indeed, goes on with this hypothetical question, encapsulating the rest of the history of the Atkinsons within the search for the apex of their powers, dramatizing how retrospective narration can contain and control disparate events within the search for causality and historical explanation. This makes it appear to the reader, at least, that the question of the zenith of Atkinsonian success is the only question worth asking by the historian.

⁸ The idea that Victorians saw their own age as one of historical progress is, of course, a common one, but was challenged then as it is now. Nevertheless, many contemporary theorists find that the Victorians tended to have a faith in history itself as a realization of historical process and progress, which is met by increasing skepticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For an interesting account of how the Victorian view of historical "progress" was constructed (and how it tended to exclude many British citizens, women in particular) see Christina Crosby's *The Ends of History: Victorians*

and *"The Woman Question*, particularly the introduction. Crosby asserts that in the Victorian era "history itself is conceptualized in profoundly theological ways, imagined as the alpha and omega of human life. This is a particular conception of history: 'history' as the revelation of meaning, of truth, the revelation of the meaning and truth of humanity" (144). In this way, history is seen as progress, in which we move toward meaning and truth, to be revealed at its end.

⁹For the purposes of this chapter, it is worthwhile to note that while I commonly reference Zizek, Zizek's own claim is most often that he is merely interpreting Lacan. Some portion of Zizek's theorizing should therefore be credited to their Lacanian roots. I choose not to delve too deeply into Zizek's original sources because Zizek's interests more completely dovetail with my own. Zizek is interested in applying Lacanian theories of the subject to broader socio-historical areas, particularly to Marxist analyses of both superstructure and base. He is also particularly interested in reconciling postmodern skepticism towards referentiality with a radical politics and more particularly, class struggle, as am I. A recent essay in which Zizek deals with this topic explicitly and relatively clearly is "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!" (Butler, Laclau and Zizek 90-135). I delineate the differences between Lacan and Zizek later in this chapter.

¹⁰Following Northrop Frye, White offers that historical events can be emplotted in four basic ways: as Tragedy, Comedy, Romance, and Satire. Here, again, White emphasizes how "plotting" is itself a fictionalizing process that pushes "history" into literary forms. White does not necessarily see this as problematic because he rejects the idea that the function of history itself should be mimetic. Rather, he insists that history's purpose is to help us understand our present age *through* the study of the past. In this way, there is no reason for historical narrative not to be largely "fictionalized" through narrative as long as it contributes to this goal. For White on the methods of emplotment, see both "The Poetics of History," his introduction to *Metahistory* and "Interpretation in History" in *Tropics of Discourse*, both of which lay out White's basic assertions about possible modes of emplotment.

¹¹This element of White's argument has much in common with Roland Barthes's analysis of the "realistic" novel in *S/Z*. Barthes famously argues that there is nothing intrinsically realistic about the "realistic novel," but rather that it deploys various textual features to simulate the effect of reality. The realistic novel is merely a series of conventional textual deployments, not a reflection of reality at all. It is for this reason (among others) that White's work is often associated with poststructural theorists like Barthes despite White's attack on such theory in essays like "The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory."

¹²For Zizek, the integration does not necessarily have to be in a physically present system of symbolization like a written narrative or book of Law. It can be, and perhaps most often is, instead the cultural "rules" which are often unspoken but nevertheless (nearly) universally followed and cultural narratives that are assumed to be true. This "big Other" of the cultural symbolic (as Zizek calls it) is often ironically questioned or refuted but its rules and assumptions are followed anyway. In this way, Zizek critiques

what he considers to be the ironic detachment of “postmodernism,” which acknowledges and at times critiques the deep problems of capitalism, but nevertheless does nothing about it. To Žižek, this type of impotent self-knowledge is nevertheless imbricated in the Symbolic (a term which Žižek associates closely with the system of capitalism itself, the dominant Western system of symbolization). “What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy* [...] *Cynical distance is just one way to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them*” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 33). It does not take too much imagination to see how this assessment of ideology in capitalist culture can apply readily to Thomas Crick’s treatment of history. Crick, like Žižek’s hypothetical postmodern cynic, sees that his “story” of history is made up, constructed, and disconnected from material reality. Still, however, he insists not only on recounting it, but also on its importance, indeed centrality, not only to his existence, but also to the world around him. Crick’s self-aware “ideological fantasy” is about the importance of “history” in opposition to “story” despite his awareness of the falseness of that dichotomy. Interestingly, Marxist critics (Fredric Jameson being the foremost example), find the erasure of history to be at the center of postmodern culture. Here, however, through a Žižekian prism, Crick seems to reflect the ironic detachment of “postmodernism” in his clinging to the materiality of “history” despite his internal disavowal of the accessibility of its independent existence.

¹³ For more on this common assertion of Crick’s see 60-63 and 106-9.

¹⁴ The nonnarratable contrasts with the narratability of traditional plot. Of course, the obsession with “plot,” “action,” and “events” in fiction is more closely associated with the realistic fiction of traditional narrative whose apex is most often located in the nineteenth century, precisely where the progressive plot of the Atkinsons occurs here. The literature of plot and dramatic conflict has been, of course, challenged by many of the works associated with high modernism, which focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people in which few “events” of dramatic import seems to happen. Nevertheless, such narratives still need an admittedly small amount of dramatic lack and/or anticipated resolution to propel the reader through the narrative. *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, builds to and climaxes with Clarissa’s party, while the “suspense” in *Ulysses* at least nominally revolves around the near misses of Bloom and Stephen, which reaches its (near) resolution in the Ithaca episode. While these novels approach the nonnarratable, they maintain a minimal level of unfulfilled readerly desire, or “plot,” to stimulate the interest in the explorations in consciousness and language that is their central object of interest. A complete lack of linear plotting, or a complete dismissal of readerly interest would constitute a nonnarratable novel, which these texts may asymptotically approach, but never quite achieve. Beckett’s novels, particularly something like *The Unnameable* or his later work, comes much closer to fulfilling the idea of a nonnarratable text.

¹⁵In a more ominous formulation, she resembles Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman in the attic, or the banishing of the hysterical woman to the realm of the "insane," as a necessary prop for the narrativization of Victorian progress.

¹⁶Ronald McKinney also notes the novel's deployment of the gothic in his "The Greening of Postmodernism: Graham Swift's *Waterland*" (822).

¹⁷This connection of the possibly insane ravings of a semi-comatose woman, dead 37 years by the time of the brewery fire, with the subsequent events that "fulfill" her prophecy fits in amiably with the Lacanian idea of the "letter" that always arrives at its destination. As Žižek describes it, the Lacanian dictum of the letter is a metaphor for both the Imaginary and Symbolic registers. On the level of the Imaginary, Žižek points out how any one who receives a letter will assume it is for them and fit its contents into their own personal narrative or subjectivity. While Žižek's examples are evocative, a simplistic version can be found in the recent film *The Love Letter*, in which any member of a small town who (accidentally) happens upon a torrid love letter assumes it is for them and constructs a story from its contents to fulfill their individual fantasies of an ideal partner. Here, the Imaginary register of subjectivity is fulfilled as the members of the town are trapped in a pre-Symbolic paradise of fulfilled fantasies through "misrecognition": "*whosoever* finds himself at this place is the addressee since the addressee is not defined by his positive qualities but by the very contingent fact of finding himself at this place" (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 11). The movie can also be read as a fulfillment of the Symbolic letter finding its destination, if, again, we read the Symbolic as the rules and codes of a text (or of social existence) that allow it to "make sense" or to retain a coherent "meaning." Again, Žižek asserts that we can find a Symbolic letter finding its destination in a series of seemingly irreducibly contingent events that, nevertheless, allow the "intended" recipient of the letter to receive it in the end (or any series of contingent events that mysteriously end where they begin). This also occurs in the film *The Love Letter* in which, despite a hopeless series of confusions and misrecognitions of the letter, its original addressee (an elderly lesbian mother) finally receives the missive from her world traveling lover and the "meaning" or "coherence" of the movie becomes clear, completing the circle of the Symbolic. This (finally) clearly applies to the strange episode of Sarah's prophetic mutterings of "Fire! Smoke!, etc." in her semi-comatose state and the actual fire 37 years later. Any words or statements Sarah would make would be (mis)recognized by the Gildseyans precisely because of the heroic status of the Atkinsons in their community. In this case, "Sarah Atkinson as prophet" is a central element of the "big Other" of Gildsey and its environs, and her statements are immediately incorporated into their cultural narrative once an appropriate event (the brewery fire) allows it. Here, again, Swift emphasizes how narrative deform the "facts" of "history" to make it "make sense" to lend it meaning and to allow it to fit into the communal "big Other."

¹⁸See D. A. Miller's "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets," in *The Novel and the Police* for an interesting discussion of the relationship between boxes and books (216). In addition, while the eighteenth century gothic novel is replete with examples of secrets uncovered in boxes, trunks, or chests, here I see a particular resonance with William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, in which the chest of Falkland contains a secret charged with

an astonishing amount of narrative energy and importance despite the fact that we never learn precisely what the box contains. One strongly implied possibility is that it contains a narrative of Falkland's crimes and transgressions, effectively destroying his status as chivalrous, kindhearted, and generous nobleman. His life's narrative is then (re)produced in the form of the novel itself, which, we are led to believe is Caleb's life story. The proliferation of stories, uncovered (or inspired by) the "secret" in Falkland's chest is an interesting parallel to the story of the Atkinsons found by Crick in *Waterland*.

¹⁹ Here, I do not suggest that the Freudian model is a natural and/or essential one. Rather, Swift self-consciously explores and exploits the Freudian model to comment on the nature of mysteries, secrets and narratability. Certainly, the use of Dick Crick and his huge phallus as a byproduct of an incestuous union is a direct reference to Freud, especially taking place, as it does, around the turn of the century, contemporary to the historical Freud. Helen Atkinson's mothering of her father after her own mother's death also seems to be a clear rewriting of the Freudian theory that desire is displaced from the mother to a mother substitute (and that all incestuous desire is a displacement of the Oedipal urge). This resonance is further indicated by the reference to the two sons of Sarah Atkinson, George and Alfred, who (it is intimated) have sexual desires for their mother that they do not act upon, instead putting those sexual energies into their work.

²⁰ Obviously, a complete list of stories with incest at their center would be impossible, but certainly a disproportionately large number of texts (particularly in the literary canon) deal with incest and incestuous desires. It is a horrible secret that is nevertheless eminently narratable. Perhaps the author whose oeuvre is most easily identified with incest as both unstoppable desire and incomprehensible secret is Faulkner (particularly in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom*). However, incestuous desire permeates canonical literature, starting, of course, with *Oedipus* itself, and continuing through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including examples of the American Gothic, such as Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love*, of the Latin American magical realist "Boom" like Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and of the postmodern/postcolonial historical novel, such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. None of this is to suggest that incest is deployed in the same ways or with the same results in these other texts, but it is merely to show the prevalence of incest-related stories and its continuing resonance in the literary imagination and its status as one of our most "narratable" plots.

²¹ It becomes clear that Crick here offers a countervailing claim to the one I made in the previous section. Here, it does seem like the past is irrevocably past through the metaphor of the dead that does not live again.

²² In the *Political Unconscious* and elsewhere, Fredric Jameson similarly identifies history as that which cannot be symbolized in conventional narrative. Rather than seeing this as an opportunity to access and identify the real as reality, however, he follows Lacan in seeing the real as approachable only asymptotically. As such, he argues for a rigorously historical analysis while denying the possibility of touching the real. In *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, Satya Mohanty criticizes Jameson for his epistemological relativism (93-115), particularly as it fails to fulfill Jameson's own stated

radical political goals. Mohanty's study shares many concerns with my own and, in this regard, I agree with him. In particular, Mohanty notes how Jameson reads history itself *as* narrative and narrative, likewise, as history. This identification between history and narrative is something my own study endeavors to deny and unmoor.

²³ This example only serves to help us understand what is conceived of as the real in *Waterland*. The real in Zizek's version of Lacanian thought is never tied to something so mundane as an actual event, but is instead the real of desire that is typically only revealed in dreams (see, for instance, Zizek, *Sublime Object* 47-49). Nevertheless, this metaphorical deployment of Zizek is useful here in indicating how Swift does, in fact, ally the "Here and Now" with the materiality of the historical past.

²⁴ Lacan's concern with the Real is principally in how subjectivity is itself defined by those desires by the subject that can never be realized, preventing the realization of a whole subject (for more on this, see Chapter One of this study). This results, in Lacanian terms, in the "barred subject," (\$) or the subject that can never explain itself and resists the "life story" as it is told to the analyst. Indeed, for Zizek, the subject is precisely the Real or the "very bar that prevents its realization" (Zizek, *Enjoy* 139). Unlike some constructions of Freudian psychoanalysis, which claim that analysis attempts to exhume the traumatic event and explain it in the form of a story, Zizek insists that Lacanian analysis is founded on the principle that such an integration is impossible. "The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom [the overt signifier of the trauma], the only support of his being" (Zizek, *Sublime Object* 75).

²⁵ Pamela Cooper also notes the parallel that the novel draws between the natural landscape and the woman's body in the novel, contrasting both with the "artificial history" of man. John Schad similarly draws the parallel between history in the novel and how women, like siltation, lie outside history.

²⁶ Along with Zizek, I advocate a return to Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Chapters Five and Six for a more complete discussion of this idea.

²⁷ As I noted in Chapter One, the model of narrative as flaccidity/tumescence/detumescence is not exclusive to Brooks and/or Miller. The most well-known iterations of this principle are located in Barthes's *Pleasure of the Text* and Robert Scholes's *Fabulation and Metafiction*. Alternatives to narrative are also commonly offered from a feminist perspective. In particular lyric unity is sometimes proffered as an antidote to narrative. See Chapter One, note 29 for a lengthy discussion of this possibility.

²⁸ For a similar perspective, see Patricia Parker's *Inescapable Romance*.

²⁹ For a more strictly Lacanian reading of the novel, see Sean P. Murphy's "In the Middle of Nowhere: The Interpellative Force of Experimental Narrative Structure in Graham Swift's *Waterland*." Murphy recites the common Lacanian line of thinking about the real, when he writes: "References to the real have nothing to do with reality. Rather, I am referring to Lacan's real order, which is comprised of that which is left out of/over from the imaginary and symbolic orders. Once parts of the real are symbolized they pass

out of the real and into the symbolic. The “contents” comprising the emptiness of the real cannot be fully symbolized” (81, n2). Although this is true of a strict interpretation of Lacan, my argument is that Swift’s novel follows the trajectory of Lacanian thought to some degree, but that its version of the “real” (the “Here and Now”) is explicitly connected to the elusive content of material reality.

³⁰Of course, White here critiques the narrative strategies of the practicing historian, a position that *Waterland* does not properly occupy. Nevertheless, in the sense that both White and Swift’s novel participate in theoretical discussions of the capacity for historical discourse to represent reality, it is reasonable here to compare them.

³¹That is, by conventional definitions, “working through” is analogized to the narrative form of the “talking cure.” LaCapra calls for a broader, more comprehensive, and utilitarian model of “working-through,” not necessarily reliant on narrative.

³²LaCapra refers to Zizek, in particular, as well as a theorist like Cathy Caruth, whose *Unclaimed Experience* argues for the primacy of traumatic experience in the representation of the past.

³³LaCapra also refers to this passage for similar purposes in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (17-18).

Chapter Three
 “What’s Real and What’s True”:
 Mahatma Gandhi, Errata, and the Shadow of the Real in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

Like the other texts this study examines, Salman Rushdie’s oeuvre is frequently discussed in terms of its unconventional and occasionally contradictory treatment of history. Rushdie’s rendering of past events is quite often read as cleaving tightly to the historical record, while at the same time treating such events cavalierly, as if they are merely stories, on an ontological level no different from his own novels. As Aruna Srisvastava asserts, in *Midnight’s Children*, “reality and truth are not quantifiable and not ascertainable. They are constructs of imagination and experience, and of language” (65).¹ In this, it reflects how Woolf’s and Swift’s novels examine the discursive and linguistic construction of history, while seemingly sacrificing the possibility of material referentiality. However, while Swift and Woolf’s novels are principally concerned with the theorization of historical discourse, *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* both perform this theorization and provide an account of actual historical events in the years before, during, and following Indian Independence and Partition. So, while it is true that Rushdie’s work insistently points to how history and historical representation are constructed from myth, from language, and from ideology, it also installs a version of events it offers as more truthful than that of traditional accounts. In doing so, it offers

that narrative is a necessary and vital part of historical representation, but that it also must be supplemented by something else.

Like Swift, Rushdie seems particularly close to theorists like Hayden White in his adoption of the notion of history as merely another narrative, whose seeming approximation of reality is merely an effect of the narrative function. Indeed, Nancy Batty has suggested that the resolute confusion of history and fiction is the central purpose of *Midnight's Children*, accomplishing both a critique of history and a re-situation of historical fiction: "Rushdie's implication — that if history is composed of fictions, then fiction can be composed of history — is perhaps the most potent message of *Midnight's Children*" (Batty 80). Michael Reder, in an attempt to clarify Batty's statement, makes a broad claim about Rushdie's beliefs that seem to follow from her assertion: "Rushdie believes that history is not scientific or objective; history is the same as 'fiction'" ("Rewriting History and Identity" 239) and "that literature and history are one and the same thing" (249, n. 52).

Where Woolf's novel portrays the traditional plotting of history as one of the tools of patriarchal domination and Swift's novel offers narrative as a strategy of comfort and relief to cover up or mitigate traumatic events whose wounds might be better left exposed, *Midnight's Children* seems to offer narrative as a tool of political, social and

religious domination, in particular through the narrative of dynastic succession and Hindu religious dominance advanced by the Nehru/ Indira Gandhi/ Sanjay Gandhi dynasty in post-Independence India. Likewise, Pakistan's narrative of religious mission and the founding of a truly Islamic state is exposed in *Shame* as merely another story, constructed for the purposes of hegemony, but with very real effects on those forced to live within its plot. That these competing Indian and Pakistani narratives have continued in various forms into the present day subcontinent makes Rushdie's confrontation of these issues remarkably relevant still, some twenty years after *Midnight's Children* was first published.

It would, however, be disingenuous to suggest that, as I have argued for Woolf and Swift, part of Rushdie's attack on narratives of dominance takes the form of an attack on the use of narrative itself in the representation of reality and history. Rather, the distaste exhibited towards certain types of dominant narrative in *Midnight's Children* is not countered with a lack of narrative, but rather through an abundance of narratives, both traditional and alternative, often incorporating the same monumental events and "great actions" of "great men" eschewed by Woolf and Swift, but examined with different interpretations or different accounts of their causation. Indeed, much of Rushdie's most acclaimed novel seems devoted to the countering of the famous political slogan "Indira is

India and India is Indira” with the claim that the fictional middle-class Bombay youth Saleem *is* India, and that India *is* Saleem through an ironic examination of the very same events that most often figure in classical accounts of India’s history, like that of Stanley Wolpert’s *A New History of India*.² Unlike *Between the Acts* and *Waterland*, *Midnight’s Children* does not seem to argue for a reconfiguration of what events should “count” as history, per se, but rather advocates a reinterpretation of those events and the history they can be made to tell. In Rushdie’s advocacy of a redeployment of events and stories that have always counted as “history,” Rushdie does not critique narrative itself as a method of recounting the real, but rather sees narrative as a medium that has not reached its transformative potential in the political, social and ethical arena.

In this context, critics most often see Rushdie, quite correctly, as an advocate of self-reflexive narrative that points to its own incapacity to fully represent the real, while simultaneously insisting on the power and importance of narrative itself. While this reading of Rushdie is valid and important, throughout this chapter I argue that Rushdie’s novel also paradoxically functions as a critique of narrative historiography and its tendency to betray a “longing for form” that encloses certain historical events while excluding others. While Rushdie’s fanciful and abundant narratives in *Midnight’s Children* do attempt to “swallow the world” and all of its players and events, these

narratives are supplemented by a shadowy series of events that are obliquely referred to but never explicitly narrated as part of the novel's multitude of stories. The present absence (or absent presence) of these events, centered around the figure of Mahatma Gandhi, illustrate the novel's non-narrative undercurrent and the insistence on the representation and inclusion of events that do not fit into a particular narrative but whose truth and reality cannot be erased. Through a succession of strategically placed "errata," Rushdie hints at the impossibility of *any* narrative containing all of the events necessary for a true fidelity to a past that is necessary to define the national and international present. The incapacity of Saleem's narrative to include these important events reveals the shortcomings of narration while insisting on a fidelity to the real that narrative, by itself, cannot fully achieve. Rushdie's alternation of unifying and coherent narrative and excessive and fragmentary non-narrative suggests some different possibilities for how the historical real can be, and should be, represented.

Inherent, however, throughout these contradictory narrative strategies, is the insistence on a referentiality to the historical past and on its necessity. It is only when Saleem is struck upon the head and is "emptied of history" (419) that he becomes a passive, submissive follower of orders, as a member of the Pakistani army. Clearly,

Rushdie suggests, an attachment to history must be maintained in order for agency to exist and for political and social action to be possible.

Midnight's Children, Postcolonial Historiography, and Class Politics

The debates over the practical utility and ethical ramifications of relativist historiography detailed in the introduction are strikingly reflected and repeated within postcolonial studies and, in particular, in studies of Rushdie. Interestingly, Rushdie is an important and oft-mentioned figure in these debates, despite the fact that his work is not explicitly part of historiographic discourse at all, but would seemingly deny history's allegiance to truth claims by operating in the field of fiction. Nevertheless, Rushdie has simultaneously claimed by both postmodernism and postcolonialism, leaving him open for praise by proponents of the radical and transgressive potential of postmodern discourse, while simultaneously leaving him open to attack from more materially minded theorists. Within postcolonial studies, the development of the Subaltern Studies movement illustrates the different approaches to historiography that Rushdie's work is both praised and castigated for employing. Particularly relevant here is the affinity Rushdie's work has with the type of historiography advocated by one of the most recent spokespersons for the movement, Dipesh Chakrabarty. Chakrabarty argues against the

deployment of historical discourse that is in keeping with the values of the Enlightenment, for these are the values of Europe, imperialism, and hegemony. This attack on Enlightenment thought consists of a critique of its false claims to objectivity and the ways in which such claims have contributed to domination and exploitation. Inherent in this critique is an effort at exposing the constructed and ideological nature of European historiography, both its methods and results, as well as an insistence that postcolonial history should consist of “provincializing Europe” and “taking history to its limits”(286). Chakrabarty’s work reflects Hayden White’s denaturalization of historical objectivity here, but instead of arguing for the denial of narrative objectivity for aesthetic reasons, Chakrabarty and like-minded theorists sees the myth of objectivity as a hegemonic strategy of domination. As such, Rushdie’s own flights of fantasy and explosion of conventional history might easily place his work in a radical political position, “taking history to its limits” and resisting the dominating influence of Europe and its historiography. Indeed, much of the critical work praising Rushdie’s aesthetic also praises his politics upon these grounds (see note 1).

Not surprisingly, however, as with the critical reaction to White, there are postcolonial theorists who see Chakrabarty’s vision of historiography not as politically and socially liberating, but as dangerous relativism and this critique extends to Rushdie as

well. In particular, critics like Arif Dirlik and Vinay Bahl have accused the Subaltern Studies collective of abandoning their stated original goal of uncovering and privileging subaltern and resistant voices in favor of a deconstructive history of the colonizer and the hegemonic West. That is, by advocating a history that “provincializes Europe,” Dirlik and Bahl contend that Chakrabarty paradoxically makes the error of denying oppressed peoples their own history, instead focusing on the fissures and inconsistencies in European historiography and granting that historiography centrality while claiming to provincialize it. Indeed, the original “mission statement” of the Subaltern Studies collective insisted not upon the provincializing and deconstructing of Europe, but upon the excavation and presentation of the material history of the oppressed. “The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism — colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. What is clearly left out of this un-historical historiography is the *politics of the people* (Guha xiv-xv). In this, it is clear that for the original Subaltern Studies group, an opposition to Enlightenment objectivity was not an issue. Rather, there is a confidence in objectivity to such a degree that there is a belief that the “true” history of the people can be uncovered and delivered. It is this objectivity that critics like Bahl and Dirlik wish to revive. Bahl argues that the “goal of Subaltern Studies, in [Chakrabarty’s] view, is not to achieve political democracy or to

promote the equal distribution wealth, but to keep alive the philosophical question of difference (Bahl 89). Bahl further argues that Chakrabarty has forgotten the important political task of recounting *real* strategies of resistance to imperialism and capitalism, displacing all oppression and resistance to a realm of discourse, while removing the important goals of class politics in favor of a philosophical deconstruction of previously written histories. In this, his argument is similar to my own critique of deconstruction in Chapter Two, noting the ways in which the “double reading” of European historiographic methods does not allow for a critique from outside that discourse. Indeed, the problem of representation of the oppressed postcolonial subject has led to a whole species of criticism dedicated to the careful separation of postcolonialism and postmodernism, despite their many discursive similarities.³

Similarly, while many critics have praised Rushdie for his novels’ role in the provincializing of Europe and the more general deconstruction of history, others have taken an approach more akin to Bahl’s critique of Chakrabarty. V. S. Naipaul insists on an allegiance to rationality and argues against Rushdiean narrative extravagance by arguing that it “dodges all the issues” (qtd. in Gorra 200). To varying degrees, Timothy Brennan (*Salman Rushdie and the Third World*) and Michael Gorra support this claim. More pointedly, M. Keith Booker, has argued that while Rushdiean stylistics may

undermine notions of rationalist linear historiography, in practice, novels like *Midnight's Children* serve to support Western liberal ideology while mocking or undermining a discourse that would be truly radical or emancipatory, name that of Marxism ("Midnight's Children, History, and Complexity"). Neil ten Kortenaar likewise notes that while Rushdie's formal elements may seem radical, in this case the destabilization of hegemonic historiography gives way to an ideology of liberal humanism that can hardly be considered radical. In fact, Rushdie's work tends to promote the same basic values as those of the classic nineteenth century realistic novel, despite its stylistic departure. In this context, it is worth noting that the protagonist of *Midnight's Children* is not the poor and downtrodden Shiva who sees the world in stark terms of class difference and is willing to use violence to rectify that difference, but is rather the bourgeois Saleem whose dreams of equality are balanced by his repulsion for Shiva and his attempts to exclude Shiva from the story of which he is a central part. In this, Rushdie's work reflects Chakrabarty's historiography and leaves it open to the criticisms of Bahl and Dirlik. After all, Saleem's story is precisely, it seems, the story of the elite middle class that has always been told, even as it is a deconstruction of it. The exclusion of Shiva in this reading presents itself as yet another iteration of class hegemony.

The placing of Rushdie's work in this constellation of debates over representation and historiography is not accidental or coincidental. Rather, Rushdie installs such debates within his own work, clearly asking to be included within this discussion. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's Uncle Hanif insists on the creation of rigidly and relentlessly "realistic" films, with allegiance to the truth of the plight of the working classes, after specializing in more fantastic storytelling techniques. Likewise, the painter Aurora da Gama in *The Moor's Last Sigh* vacillates between artistic styles which might be said to show allegiance to objectivity and those more in line with deconstruction or denaturalization. So, while Rushdie's critics accuse him of flights of fantasy and representational methods inimical to radicalism, Rushdie examines closely the radical and liberating potential of multiple modes of representation. Contrary to critical consensus, however, Rushdie's deployment of denaturalizing and extravagant narrative strategies do not necessarily point only to a desire to "take history to its limits" or to denaturalize historical objectivity. Rather, they also suggest alternative means to establish objectivity and to access the real.

Mistakes and Lies

Central both to the praise and the critique of Rushdie's politics is the interpretation of his various aesthetic strategies as the denaturalization and deconstruction of history. In particular, *Midnight's Children* deploys a contrast of unification and fragmentation that results in various self-conscious mistakes, or "errata." Likewise, Rushdie consistently and comprehensively literalizes various commonly used metaphors to create a world where language and materiality are nearly continuous. Critics have almost universally taken both of these strategies to be examples of Rushdie's postmodernist historical relativism and have assessed his work's social and political impact accordingly. On the contrary, while these strategies do certainly complicate and critique notions of transparent referentiality, they do so not to dissolve the possibility of historical reference, but to insist upon an access to historical materiality that accounts for these complications both through narrative and its opposite

First, as in Swift's *Waterland* and particularly Woolf's *Between the Acts*, *Midnight's Children* enacts a vacillation between the unity of form and its opposite in fragmentation. While critical focus tends to be upon the latter, there is a certain mania for form in the novel that reflects Miss La Trobe's initial horror at the prospect of dispersal. Saleem is consumed with the desire to narrate his entire life and that of his

nation in order to acquire meaning: “I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning — yes meaning— something” (4). Here, Saleem feels the necessity of completing his story, providing closure and wholeness to his life’s narrative, indicating, as in both *Waterland* and *Between the Acts*, how comprehensibility can only be generated from a completed whole and a unified form. It is undoubtedly this urge that leads Saleem to attempt to create a Great Story, or a comprehensive history that “swallows” the multitude within one:

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me; and guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut in the centre, clutching at the dream of that holey, mutilated, square of linen, which is my talisman, my open-sesame, I must commence the business of remaking my life (4; emphasis in original)

The duality and internal contradictions of *Midnight’s Children*, of Saleem and ultimately of India itself are contained quite startlingly in this passage. Saleem declares the multitude of divergent tales⁴ and participants that his autobiography will contain, noting the seeming incompatibility of the “improbable and the mundane” that will constitute his tale. Nevertheless, he asserts that his life *will* contain all of these divergent narratives, “swallowing” them whole into his singular body and his singular story,

providing a unity of form and content that would seem, at best, unlikely from such divergent source material.⁵ Ironically, however, the object that will allow him to bring all of these divergent elements together, the “open-sesame” that allows Saleem access to a past that he has not lived (that of his ancestors), is one of the novel’s most obvious symbols of fragmentation: the holey bedsheet that played such an instrumental role in the courtship of Dr. Aadam Aziz and the “Reverend Mother” Naseem, Saleem’s apparent grandparents. The sheet serves as the covering necessary for the modesty of purdah, preventing Dr. Aziz from viewing his patient in her wholeness. Instead, he is only allowed to view small portions of her through the circular hole, fragmenting her body and allowing Aziz to slowly, piece by piece, fall in love with her. Ironically, this quite obvious symbol of the magic of fragmentation allows Saleem to make his narrative unified: “I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge” (15). That is through the deployment of this “holey” symbol, Saleem makes his history “whole,” filling in the gaps in his narrative. The thematic oscillation between form and fragmentation continues throughout the novel. On the side of form and unity, the novel moves from Nadir Khan’s roommate whose paintings “had grown larger and larger as he tried to get the whole of life into his art” (50), to Lifafa Das, the peepshow proprietor who invites people to “see the whole world” in his postcards, to Saleem

himself, who finally asserts that: “Everything has shape if you look for it. There is no escape from form” (271). He likewise asserts that the urge to find form and unity is endemic to India, a “national longing for form” and that “form lies hidden within reality” (359). These urges towards formal unity are contrasted with the equally prevalent images of fragmentation: the slow dissolution and eventual fragmentation of Saleem’s body into 400,000, 506⁶ pieces, Amina’s resolve to fall in love with Ahmed Sinai piece by piece, and the slow dissolution of the Midnight’s Children Conference. Within the logic of constructivist historiography in the mode of Hayden White, the urge to unify and explain that is indicated in the “national longing for form” is actually a barrier to material reference, while the possibility of the fragmentation of that unity might be the only possible access to the real. Under such theories, the process of unification, of the filling in of gaps, that Saleem undertakes is considered a process of transformation from a more referential history, always contingent and meaningless, into a “meaningful” fiction, a story with identifiable themes, storylines and moral content, but with no identifiable link to the historical real. Importantly, in *Midnight’s Children*, as in *Waterland*, while unity, structure, and narrative itself provide the comfort of understanding and meaning, it is those events that refuse to conform to that unity that the novel offers as undeniably

historically accurate, lying outside the purview of narrative. In this way, fragmentation, again, becomes a version of the real itself, not a denial of it.

The unity Saleem strives for in his story is generated by Saleem's efforts to correlate himself with the nation as a whole, leading him to manipulate personal and political chronology in order to correlate more clearly with one another. This leads to many historical errors, identified by Rushdie retroactively as "errata." It is these mistakes that compose one of Rushdie's assertions of the real, our capacity to access it, and the necessity of doing so. This necessity is most clearly indicated through the errors surrounding Mahatma Gandhi's existence and his general exclusion from Saleem's narrative. Through the elaboration of these "errata," Rushdie proposes important distinctions between the real, fictional narratives, and outright lies and falsehoods; distinctions useful in untangling historiographic theory and its implications for ethics and politics.

Rushdie points to the importance of these frequent errors in an 1987 essay, offering that they function not merely to identify Saleem as an "unreliable narrator," ("Errata" 22) but also for rather more important reasons, although even Rushdie's explanation seems unsatisfactory. First, Rushdie emphasizes that the majority of the errors are intentionally introduced to encourage the readers to "maintain a healthy distrust" of Saleem and particularly his efforts to correlate Indian history and his own personal saga. Rushdie reminds his readers that *Midnight's Children* was conceived of as

a novel of memory and thus was meant to be both selective and inaccurate.⁷ In addition, Rushdie seems to follow the lead of theorists like Pierre Nora, who separate memory from history, by offering it as a personal and liberating alternative to oppressive traditional histories. Saleem's memory becomes, in this construction, an alternative narrative dedicated to "denying the official, politicians' version of the truth ("Imaginary Homelands" 14). Saleem echoes this assertion in *Midnight's Children* when he claims memory "creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own" (253). It is through memory that Rushdie suggests that a migrant like himself can look back to "create fictions [...] imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" ("Imaginary Homelands" 10).

In acknowledging that Saleem's memory is constructed from errors, selections, erasures, and obfuscations and in preferring it to institutional and political histories, Rushdie falls into what appears to be a typically postmodern relativism. Like Kundera and Spiegelman, he acknowledges memory's incapacity to access the real, while simultaneously asserting its preferability to any historical account that is destined to be both inaccurate and oppressive:

History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions, and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of Saleem's unreliable narration might be, I believe, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, everyday, attempt to "read" the world. ("Errata" 25)

That is, by Rushdie's account, Saleem's mistakes underscore his deconstruction of the discourse of history, emphasizing its fallibility, construction, and inaccuracy, commenting on how any claim about the past holds limited access to the real and how all

historical accounts are subject to personal and ideological manipulation, both conscious and unconscious. Certainly this explains, to a degree, why Saleem makes so many historical errors, but it does not explain fully why he is so aware of some of those mistakes and so troubled by them. Rather, Rushdie's explanation is not completely satisfactory and undersells the importance of errata in the novel. Indeed, the full understanding of the use of the errata reveals that they assert the possibility of accurate referentiality and the importance of an adherence to the historical real despite the pitfalls Rushdie points to in this essay. Most importantly, perhaps, to this understanding is the simple assertion that, in pinpointing Saleem's errors and correcting them both within the text and in his later essay, Rushdie asserts the existence of factual accuracy that exceeds or lies outside of his protagonist's errors.

Most of these mistakes are generated by Saleem's efforts to correlate his own life with that of his country. In particular, Saleem's complex structural model for connecting himself to India is so comprehensive as to become parodic. Saleem's belief in his own centrality derives from the letter he receives from Prime Minister Nehru once he is determined to be the foremost "midnight's child," or the one born closest to the precise moment of Indian Independence. "You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (143). Because of this close link, we are certainly meant to read the novel as a historical account of Indian history and politics, but the novel likewise functions as a parody of that history, not in the least because Saleem's purported status as the "midnight's child" is erroneous, as he was switched at birth with the knock-kneed Shiva. The ridiculously elaborate structural

framework Saleem needs to make all events in his personal life relevant to the nation as a whole furthers this parody.

How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our [...] scientists might term 'modes of connection' composed of 'dualistically-combined configurations' of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: active-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world. (285-86)

The pseudo-scientific language and elaborate ends Saleem takes to connect himself to history points the reader away from taking Saleem's claims seriously. Saleem goes on to define each of his four terms, noting how he affects his nation both literally and metaphorically and how India affects him in both manners. No doubt, with such an elaborate rubric *any* member of the nation could find correspondences between history and their own lives, but of course this is, at least partially, the point Rushdie makes here. Equally important, however, is the implication that such elaborate structuring sacrifices referentiality for unity. This is clear when Saleem's mania for form and consistency produce a close correspondence between his own life and India's but does so by generating obvious mistakes.

The best and most significant example occurs when Saleem recounts how he hears of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi while viewing his Uncle Hanif's

successful film, *The Lovers of Kashmir*. To the uninitiated reader, nothing seems amiss in this account but two chapters later, Saleem realizes he has made a mistake. “Re-reading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of the Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time” (198). Here, Rushdie infers, through the mis-timing of Gandhi’s death in his India, that it was not the right time for Gandhi to die when he did in our own, even if that date is correct, factually speaking. Still, however, there is more to this error than a brief commentary on the tragedy of the Mahatma’s murder, as Saleem seems much more unnerved by his error than by the fact of Gandhi’s death. In fact, he begins to doubt the validity of his entire narrative:

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything — to rewrite everything — to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can’t judge. I’ll have to leave it to others. For me, there can be no going back; I must finish what I’ve started, even if, inevitably, what I finish turns out not to be what I began. (198)

In this, Saleem begins to suspect that his efforts to place himself in a “central role” may be stretching the limits of historical accuracy beyond their breaking point.

Indeed, this inconsistency does begin to threaten his elaborate structural framework, but

it does so by introducing the true date of the Mahatma's death, a small slice of reality itself. That is, while most accounts of Rushdie's errata identify these errors as merely self-reflexive signals to the reader of the inevitable inaccuracy of all historical narration, particularly by forcing facts into the requirements of storytelling, they paradoxically accomplish this by pointing to the real itself. The errata, then, introduce an accurate referentiality for which narrative cannot account, even while that narrative continues.

The other mistakes that Rushdie points to in the essay also come as a result of Saleem's efforts to integrate his own life with his nation's,⁸ but they too function not merely as an index of the fundamental impossibility of accurate representation, but as an injunction to the reader to find a version that is more correct than Saleem's. David Carroll's claim that a coherent national story naturally contributes to and supports a unified and healthy subjectivity is undercut here (Carroll 112; see Srisvastava, "The Empire Writes Back" 112). Rather, the two narratives, personal and national, push and pull at one another, generating errors in one or the other, in an effort to make them continuous. It thus becomes difficult to believe Rushdie's invocations to always trust the relative truth of one's own memories at the expense of the official version of the truth, when memory's narrative is not only provisionalized, but a more accurate reparative is also presented in a form outside that narrative.

The introduction of errata that are then exposed as “untrue” introduces the question of truth itself through the backdoor of its opposite. The very notion of truth undergoes a radical transformation within the context of poststructuralism and historical truth undergoes a similar reevaluation under the aegis of constructivist historiography. This, in turn, leads to the questioning of the distinctions between fiction and lies, or untruths. Certainly, Saleem’s narration of Gandhi’s assassination seems to fall into both categories. While it is undoubtedly part of a fiction, its laying claim to historical personages and events seems to allow it to be read as “untrue” as well. The crucial distinction between fictional truths, untruths, and outright lies are, however, central to the novel, and are only partially evident in the mistakes made by its narrator. Few critics note these crucial distinctions, but Neil ten Kortenaar makes some initial observations by asking “if history is a fiction, why should any one version be preferable to another?” (“Allegory of History” 53) noting the same ethical and political pitfalls offered by materialist critics of constructivist historiography.⁹ However, Rushdie is careful, to show that not only are some fictions preferable to others, but also that fiction itself is not, in itself, a lie. This distinction is clearest in the contrast Saleem draws between the fictions of his native India and lies of Pakistan:

in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case; and maybe this was the difference between my

Indian childhood and my Pakistani adolescence — that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift, disorientated [sic], amid an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies. (389)

Saleem responds to the election-day manipulations of General Zulfikar, reflected multiple times in *Shame* by the practices of Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa.¹⁰ Post-Orwell it is, of course, not surprising to find a critique of an authoritarian government's domination and control not only of individual lives, but also of information and what is considered to be truth itself, but most such critiques come from a position of relative epistemological certainty, in which the manipulation of truth is unacceptable precisely because there is a truth underneath its manipulation to be uncovered.¹¹ The postmodernist viewpoint most often attributed to Rushdie does not seem to allow such a solid rock to stand upon for his critique of Pakistani politics. Rather, Saleem is left offering an infinity of alternative realities as opposed to a single one in his attempt to overcome an equally infinite number of lies. The mere identification of an infinity of realities seems to deconstruct the binary notion of truth vs. falsehood, and also seems to invalidate the critique of one side of that binary, or at the very least resituates such a critique radically.

The introduction of the notion of historical accuracy in the form of the correction of errors continues here, as Rushdie refuses the extremity of relativism that would allow political lies and manipulation to assume the same status as fictions, whether it be his own or others. By separating fictions from lies, Rushdie maintains the possibility of political critique and ethical consistency by insisting on a limit to his own relativist historiography and acknowledging the necessity of a degree of materialist referentiality. Indeed, Rushdie has argued that it may sometimes be “better to counter myths with facts” (“Dynasty” 52), although his own allegiance to myths makes this dichotomy tentative at

best. In either case, Rushdie's inclusion of errors and their correction, along with his refusal to allow realities and lies the same epistemological status indicates an adherence to materiality that his work is rarely afforded by critics.

Indeed, Rushdie never dismisses the possibility of historical referentiality. Instead, he insists upon it by pointing to several events that have been recounted incorrectly or misleadingly in traditional historical discourse. Again, here, the crucial distinction between untruths and narratives, including fictions, is upheld. In delineating the "truths" of these events, particularly the Amritsar Massacre and Indira's Emergency, he insists that truth can also be found elsewhere. In the case of the Emergency, whereas the positive side is often highlighted, Saleem insists that "it had a black part as well as a white" (427). In particular the paying of taxes and the trains running on time (434) are accomplished through fear, tyranny, suspension of civil rights, forced sterilization, etc.¹² For Rushdie, this is not merely an alternative story to the one painted by Indira in her official statements and writings, but also a truer one. Likewise, whereas postmodern readings of *Midnight's Children* note the possibility of multiple interpretations of the Amritsar Massacre, Rushdie clearly asserts the truth of one type of interpretation over another. That is, while Sabrina Hassumani writes that "History. Rushdie demonstrates, is always an interpretation that depends on the subjective perspective of the interpreter," (36) Rushdie consistently makes a distinction between a subjective interpretation and ideological deception for political dominance. Hassumani suggests that Rushdie offers epistemological equivalency to diametrically opposed versions of the massacre: "The colonizers viewed this as putting order to chaos; the colonized viewed it as a cold-blooded massacre of innocent victims" (36). Rather, Rushdie clearly asserts the truth of one type of interpretation over another. He does not grant equal epistemological status to

Indira Gandhi's version of the Emergency or General Dyer's version of the massacre. When Dyer calls the massacre "a jolly good thing" (*Midnight's Children* 35), this is clearly a condemnation of an imperial system based on violence and racism, not a value-neutral presentation of alternative opinions.¹³ In his deployment of subtle distinctions between political propaganda, subjective interpretation, lies, truth, mistakes, and myth, Rushdie allows for an insistence on historical materiality without a dependency on the rigid binaries deconstructed by poststructuralism and dissolved by Hayden White's historiography. Rushdie also deploys another important gray area between truth and falsehood in order to insist on the political and ethical importance of maintaining some measure of historical materialism; that of metaphor.

Literal Metaphors and Metaphorical Truth

Perhaps, the most pervasive of Rushdie's narrative strategies that are used both to expose the pitfalls of historical discourse and to insist upon its necessity is the literalization of commonly used metaphors. Both David Lipscomb and Neil ten Kortenaar note the ways in which Rushdie self-consciously takes metaphors commonly employed in conventional textbook accounts of Indian history and makes them literal. In particular, both note that Rushdie self-consciously uses Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India*, transforming its descriptive metaphors into literal events in *Midnight's Children*. So, when Saleem says, early in the novel, "I am not speaking metaphorically; [...] I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug — that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams" (37), he is not only providing the reader with a list of coming attractions, but is

also informing them of the novel's central strategy of making metaphors literal. In this case, Saleem is literally, physically, disintegrating, not just having a mental breakdown as the common metaphor suggests. The entire novel is permeated by such metaphors, recounted by many critics (see esp. Kortenaar, "Allegory of History" 43). Likewise, it is not merely isolated events that receive this treatment, but the novel itself is built on the metaphors of the "body" of the nation and its birth, both literalized in the figure of Saleem, who is born precisely at the moment of Independence and becomes an embodiment of the nation as a whole. As several critics have noted, the pervasiveness of this narrative strategy serves to illustrate the degree to which conventional historical narration relies on metaphor and/or tropes to convey its purportedly neutral reportage.

Metaphor, by its nature, colors the presentation of events and lends it a degree of interpretation, by comparing one set of events to something else. If history is supposed to be a transparent presentation of past events, its heavy reliance on metaphors exposes the degree to which it depends upon the conventions of fictional narrative and tropological language that describes not the event itself, but something else entirely. The fantastic, extravagant, and fairy-tale feel of *Midnight's Children* that Naipaul criticizes comes principally from the literal presentation of historiography's metaphorical excesses, not from any science-fiction style departure of imagination. Rather, it reveals how these flights of fancy, these deviations from the reality of materially lived experience, are already installed in discourse that is seemingly most reliant on the materiality of life itself, that of history. This, in turn, leads to the reasonable assertion that Rushdie echoes and reiterates Hayden White's claims that narrative and language prevent an accurate account of history, and that, in fact, any sense we have of the reality of history is built on language in all of its semiological slipperiness. As Kortenaar n writes: "*Midnight's*

Children exposes the fictionality, the constructedness, of the metaphors and narrative conventions implied in national history” (“Allegory of History” 51). In doing so, Rushdie seems to offer the possibility that both the nation and its history are nothing if not a metaphor .

This construction of the nation as its own narration is most explicit when Saleem presents his pre-partum self not only as India, but also as the book he is writing,

Midnight’s Children.

What had been [...] no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming, one might say, a book — perhaps an encyclopedia — even a whole language [...] which is to say that the lump in the middle of my mother grew so large [...] Amina found herself in a circular first-floor tower room, scarcely able to move beneath the weight of her leaden balloon (115)

This is only one of several instances wherein Saleem draws a parallel between himself and the narrative(s) of which he and India itself are a part. In this chain of metaphorical signification Saleem becomes equivalent to the novel that he occupies, while the novel and the histories it both parallels and parodies become equivalent to the nation of India itself. In this way, the novel works to undercut the notion of India as an inviolable land mass and a material population and transforms the nation into the process of its own narration and into its social and linguistic construction. India becomes a discursive construction as opposed to a purely material entity. Rushdie summarizes this position quite effectively in the question he asks of India’s residents in “The Riddle of Midnight: India, August 1987.” Quite simply, “*Does India exist?*” (26; emphasis in original).

Rushdie's transformation of nation into discourse does not appear to be revolutionary at this late stage, although it was more so when *Midnight's Children* was first published. As Josna Rege reminds us, "It may [...] be useful to remember that the publication of [*Midnight's Children*] preceded the contemporary critique of nationalism" (252). The "contemporary critique of nationalism" Rege refers to here tends to offer, like Rushdie, the nation as at least as much fictional construction and discourse as concrete material reality. The studies of Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee, and Eric Hobsbawm have served to make this type of critique more orthodoxy than radicalism in recent years.¹⁴ What these critics have in common is their assertion that while it is certainly true that most nations are defined within specific, if contested, geographical parameters the sense a people has of its own national community or national story is almost completely imagined not in strict adherence to these national boundaries but through national stories and traditions. Bhabha and Chatterjee both bring this type of theory into the post-colonial context that Rushdie also occupies, although with different ideological conclusions.¹⁵

The transformation of the nation into its own narration likewise transforms a landmass into an imaginary construction, something Rushdie makes clear:

this year [...] there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless, quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will — except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madras, and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth — a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivaled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God." (129-30)¹⁶

It is significant that the nation must not only be imagined at the moment of its birth, but also must be continually reimagined and willed into being, because it is a collective fiction that can never exist outside the minds of its creators. It is a story whose tale must continue to incorporate new events and new participants if it is to retain its usefulness, and therefore its existence. It is also important here to remember that India may fit more readily into the notion of an “invented” nation than some others, in that the “complete” Indian nation comprised of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, never existed and that this imagined nation was created only at the moment of independence from Britain, which was also, of course, the moment of the Partition of India and Pakistan (see Rushdie, “The Riddle of Midnight” 27). Rushdie is also careful, in *Shame*, to point to the imaginative construction of Pakistan.¹⁷ Of course, with the Partition came the creation of at least two separate narratives validating the presence of both India and Pakistan, along with religious and territorial claims based on those narratives. That these competing narratives of national development were constructed largely post-partition can hardly be refuted, but they are, of course, still being hotly contested today with the most powerful of weapons.

We arrive, then, at the difficult and confusing conclusion, that *Midnight's Children* proposes India itself as a fiction built largely upon the discourse of traditional history, the stories of India that construct its imagined community. These histories, in turn, are built upon a series of metaphors that, when literalized in *Midnight's Children*, reveal the disconnection between what could be said to have actually occurred and the communal vision expressed through historical discourse. It seems, at the very least, that while shared fictions may be necessary to construct a nation, these fictions can have no relation to the truth of the historical past built as they are upon metaphors and tropes that

do not describe lived experience, but give us an alternative fantasy world. How then to account for Rushdie's insistence upon an allegiance not only to the truth of events like the Amritsar Massacre and the Emergency, but on the possibility of accessing them?

There can be no answer to this question within the account of metaphor suggested by poststructuralist thought and applied liberally to postmodernist fiction like that of Rushdie. Certainly, within this thought, metaphor is seen as the principal structure of language itself, comparing one thing to another in a string of significations that never ultimately reveal a referent. However, Saleem's explicit references to metaphor in *Midnight's Children* do *not* reveal such a radical skepticism towards a possible referentiality, but rather see the potential of metaphor to paradoxically reveal reality itself, rather than obscure it. This is most forcefully expressed when Saleem insists to Padma upon the reality of his supernatural clairvoyance, despite the fact that it is clearly a metaphor for Rushdie's own capacity to see and control all of his character's minds.

I am not speaking metaphorically; what I have just written [...] is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's-head truth. [...] Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real. A thousand and one children were born; there were a thousand and one possibilities which had never been present at one time before; and there were a thousand and one dead ends. Midnight's children can be made to represent many things, according to your point-of-view; they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished; but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of rambling, diseased mind. No: illness is neither here nor there. (240)¹⁸

Saleem here argues to Padma, that although the existence of the "midnight's children" is metaphorical, it is, nevertheless, real and true. That is, while metaphorical, it

is *not* a wholesale invention or lie. While it may require considerable interpretational license, there are several senses in which the “midnight’s children” Saleem refers to do exist and are not merely inventions of a fevered mind. Saleem tells Padma that there were 1001 new children born between midnight and one o’clock A. M. in India, and that each of these children had magical gifts or abilities, the more powerful the closer their birth was to midnight. Although this certainly deviates from any kind of conventionally verifiable historical record, their functional purpose within the novel’s world has a clear parallel in our own real world. In fact, “midnight’s children” has become a commonly used term in Indian historical discourse to refer to the first generation of Indians who never lived under the Raj, but who came into being more or less coterminously with the new nation.¹⁹ So, while the 1001 fantastical children born in the midnight hour do not exist, *per se*, the people they metaphorically represent, undoubtedly do exist and carry some of the symbolic weight of the children in the novel. Like those metaphorical children, the generation that grew up in a newly independent India carried the hope and optimism associated with new beginnings, and like those children, many of their hopes proved unfounded and many of their lives foreclosed.

Saleem’s insistence that fictions, stories, and legends are not necessarily the opposite of facts, truth and reality, and that truth has metaphorical content is not limited

to this discussion of the children, but extends to various episodes in the novel. Likewise, Rushdie asserts in an interview with Kumkum Sangari, “It seems to me very telling that those elements which are clearly untrue are central to the notion of fiction — but that doesn’t mean that they don’t tell you the truth” (Chauhan 63).²⁰ So, when Mian “The Hummingbird” Abdullah’s fails to form an Islamic Convocation that creates a secular India and resists the Muslim League’s efforts at Partition, Saleem invokes the “legend” surrounding this event to point to its importance. “Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts,” Saleem suggests (54). The legend details Abdullah’s assassination by six men in black with crescent knives and the supernaturally high-pitched humming that Abdullah unleashes, gathering 6,420 stray dogs to avenge Abdullah, leaving the killers “so badly damaged that nobody could say who they were” (50). Certainly, the details of this legend cannot be historically accurate in the conventional sense, but the exposition of the legend brings attention to an event, or a group of people, most often “swept under the rug,” and left out of the reported facts of mainstream Indian historical and political discourse.

It has been common, particularly with the increasing power of Hindu nationalism, to paint the role of Muslims in Indian political history as ardently separatist and resistant to cooperation. Rushdie’s invention of the Hummingbird and his Convocation illustrates

the broader truth of the historical marginalization of moderate Islam. Saleem suggests that, even if not all coordinates of the legend of Abdullah and his Convocation are historically accurate, they nevertheless keep alive the truth of the historical and contemporary existence of a substantial part of the Islamic community that is not ardently anti-Hindu or anti-India, as the two have become increasingly conflated in contemporary political rhetoric.²¹

As Gandhi is an important figure within the novel's construction of its errata, he is also central to Rushdie's definition and deployment of metaphor. Aruna Srisvastava illustrates the various historical models that Rushdie deploys in his efforts to find both truth and history and the distinctions between them. While Srisvastava, like many others, points to both Foucault and Nietzsche and their postmodernist attempts to deconstruct history as models for Rushdie, she also points instructively to Gandhi who asserts, "that which is permanent eludes the historian of events. Truth transcends history" (qtd. in Srisvastava 66). Srisvastava proceeds to note how Gandhi's sense of history is mythological and timeless, rather than confined by dates and immediate causality, the provinces of traditional history. Also important here, however, is the sense that truth itself, a concept looked skeptically upon by the likes of Foucault and Nietzsche, may be available and accessible, not perhaps through conventional means, but through embracing

the liberatory power of metaphor and myth. While Srisvastava points to the universal and transcendental possibilities of Gandhian history, Rushdie is more concerned, I suggest, with the exigencies of accurate historical representation and how, paradoxically, metaphor and myth may help us to achieve this goal where conventional methods cannot.

Consistent with Rushdie's efforts to note the truth-telling potential of metaphor is his separation of metaphor, as such, from lies and intentional deception. Indeed, this separation of metaphor and lie takes on even greater significance in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The protagonist of this later historical novel, Moraes Zogoiby, is convinced to abandon his family by his lover, Uma Sarasvati, by the stories she tells of her past. In fact, Uma presents a different life story and a different identity to each member of the Zogoiby family in her effort to supplant Moraes's mother, Aurora, and bring herself to artistic and social prominence. While the capacity to portray different selves, to create one's own life narrative and to re-invent one's identity is part and parcel of the postmodernism Rushdie's work is often associated with, here there is a careful limit to such play that is applied by Moraes and by the novel as a whole. That is, while there is a power, a truth, and a political and social utility to metaphor, Rushdie is careful to delineate between metaphors and lies, even when his characters do not or can not. When Moraes confronts Uma about her false claim that her parents are dead and that her uncle

has abusively raised her, Uma makes a defense built around this difference, or lack thereof:

“But what you said about your family. And the ‘uncle’ [...] it wasn’t true, Uma. Your parents are alive and the uncle was a husband.”

“It was a metaphor. Yes! A metaphor of how wretched my life was, of my pain. If you loved me you would not give me the third degree. If you loved me you would stop shaking your poor fist, and put it here, and you would shut your sweet face, and bring it here, and you would do what lovers do.”

“It wasn’t a metaphor, Uma,” I said, backing away. “It was a lie. What’s scary is, you don’t know the difference.” (*Moor’s Last Sigh* 269-70)²²

As Ambreen Hai points out, Uma is “ungrounded in ethicality or belief, unmooring hybridity from desirability” (42). In fact, Uma’s status as changeling, as primal source of stories and representations without any kind of referent or “true self” beneath the performances seems to be a warning against the extremes of postmodern relativism that Rushdie himself is often said to promote.

None of this works to clarify, precisely, what the difference between metaphorical truth and outright falsehood is in the novel and why this distinction is so crucial to the politics and ethics of *Midnight’s Children* and Rushdie’s work in general. What we can see, is that Rushdie, in general, and in *Midnight’s Children* in particular, despite its critique of historical representation, is not willing to give up the terms “truth” and “reality,” to a discourse outside of narrative and metaphor, if such a discourse exists.

Rather, he insists on its presence within these figures, despite what might be perceived as their literal deviation from our materially lived existence. In a revealing statement, Rushdie defines “metaphor” in terms of his own status as migrant intellectual: “The very word *metaphor*, with its roots in the Greek words for *bearing across*, describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants —borne-across humans— are metaphorical beings in their essence” (“Gunter Grass” 278; emphasis in original).

Fascinating here is the notion that real people can be “metaphorical beings” and that metaphor can be part of an inherent essence, with essence being precisely that which is denied to be relevant by poststructuralist thought. Indeed, in this statement, the contention that the acknowledgment of linguistically constructed subjectivity precludes essence is turned on its head, as language’s most fluid component, figuration itself, is constructed as that which constitutes essence. Metaphor is suggested to be that which provides a bridge between lived experience, ideas, and images, and migrants are metaphorically the same as metaphor. As vertiginous as this comparison becomes if looked at closely, it is clear that for Rushdie metaphor is a gateway to truth as much as it is an obfuscation of it and is not necessarily that which leads us astray.

The Epistemology of Metaphor and Fictional Worlds

To clarify the distinction Rushdie develops, it is helpful to invoke Paul de Man, and particularly his “The Epistemology of Metaphor,” which takes the problematics of metaphor and referentiality seriously and helps to pinpoint the area of Rushdie’s crucial insights. De Man’s investigation of metaphor in this essay begins precisely with the troubling relationship between history’s claims to referentiality and its use of “metaphors, tropes and figural language” (34). As de Man takes great pains to prove over the length and breadth of his work, the problems of the referentiality of metaphor “have been a perennial problem, and [...] a recognized source of embarrassment for philosophical discourse and [...] for all discursive uses of language, including historiography and literary analysis” (34). Why is the presence of metaphor so troubling for such a wide variety of discourses? It is not a problem inherent to metaphor itself, but to the discourses to which de Man refers. These discourses make implicit claims to some measure of referentiality, whether this reference be to philosophical truth, to actual events, or to other stable texts to analyze, and they all must establish the possibility of their discourse referring “rigorously” to their objects of study. Metaphor and figuration are always referring to something other than their perceived object, through the process

of comparison and signifying chains, displacing the possibility of a stable and rigorous analysis. So, as de Man suggests, “It appears that philosophy either has to give up its constitutive claim to rigor in order to come to terms with the figurality of its language or that it has to free itself from figuration altogether” (34).

De Man, over the course of many essays, recounts how many of the most well-respected and “rigorous” of Western philosophers attempt to free their discourse from figuration and metaphor in an effort to maintain rigor and the ability to refer to reality, as such. However, as de Man, puts it, “the use and abuse of language cannot be separated from each other” (41). That is, the representational capacity of language cannot be separated from its figurative and metaphorical content, and when referring to such innocent things as “the legs of the table or the face of the mountain” (42), already a “catechresis” or “abuse of language” takes place, as “one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters” (42), or, in this case, a world of walking tables and talking mountains.

De Man goes on to invoke Locke’s well-known struggle with the slippery nature of language in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in which Locke attacks the error of mistaking the metaphors and figures of language with the “real world,” as such: “he that hath *ideas* of substances disagreeing with the real existence of things, so

far wants the materials of true knowledge in his understanding, and has instead thereof *chimeras*. [...] He that thinks the name *centaur* stands for some real being, imposes on himself and mistakes words for things” (qtd. in de Man 42; Locke Bk. 3, Chap. 10; emphasis in original). Here the application to *Midnight's Children* becomes evident. That is, where de Man declares that philosophy and history either must give up their claims to rigor and referentiality *or* must attempt to divorce their discourse from figuration altogether, Rushdie's novel refuses both of these options by insisting on both the referentiality of historical discourse and on the taking the latter to its unexpected logical extreme. That is, where referentiality and rigor are guaranteed by the elimination of metaphor and figuration, Rushdie succeeds in the reversal of this assertion by creating a world in which the tropological and the literal are not separated by an undividable chasm, but are, in fact, coterminous. In this world, Saleem's India, reality *does* have metaphorical content and, indeed, the metaphorical *is* the real. By literalizing metaphor, Rushdie creates a world wherein the linguistic slippage invoked by de Man and poststructuralist thought in general is eliminated, not highlighted, a world in which the linguistic and the metaphorical refer precisely to reality. That is, when Ahmed Sinai and other Indian businessmen, begin to turn white because they have internalized the mindset

and ideology of the English colonizers, this is not a catachresis, or a fatal mistaking of language for reality, because in this world, language and reality are not separable.

This focus on Rushdie's narrative strategy as the creation of another world brings us, inevitably perhaps, to the discourse of fictional worlds theory, represented most archetypally by Thomas Pavel's book, *Fictional Worlds* and revived very recently in reference to *Midnight's Children* by Richard Walsh in his "Fictionality and Mimesis." Walsh provides a useful shorthand definition of fictional worlds theory and identifies some of its problems, particularly in relationship to a novel like Rushdie's. As Walsh explains, fictional worlds theory developed in response to structuralist and post-structuralist accounts of language and referentiality, whose primary concern has been "the linguistic and ontological problem of fictional reference" (114) as discussed at length in this study. Fictional worlds theory aims to avoid this problem altogether:

The solution is elegant and simple: fictional worlds, literally understood as non-actual other worlds, rather than as imitations of this one, resolve the problem by providing for literal reference in fictional texts. The world to which a fictional narrative refers is a textual construct, to be extrapolated from the sentences of the text itself in the broad context of our knowledge and understanding of the real world, supplemented by a framework of inference rules and qualified by generic and specific deviations from real-world norms. (Walsh 114)

Indeed, much of Pavel's very interesting work is devoted to explaining how readers fill in the gaps left in the closed and created-whole-cloth fictional world with their knowledge

of the “real world” which they inhabit. The real world then becomes a supplementary author of sorts in the creation of the fictional one, but the latter in no sense refers to the former directly. Mimetics and referentiality then become non-issues. Although this type of theory may be useful in establishing the unique character of Saleem’s world, such a theory fails in the face of what is clearly in *Midnight’s Children* an attempt to represent the real India of the twentieth century, albeit with some important differences (see also Kane 116).

The status of Rushdie’s India as an alternative country to our own is only strengthened over the course of his oeuvre in which characters recur and non-actual events that happen in one novel have an impact upon other novels.²³ Rushdie’s compatibility with fictional worlds theory is clear in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* in which the guitarist/protagonist, Ormus Cama, has visions of an alternate real, that seems to closely resemble our own. Rushdie’s affirms his interest in creating an alternative fictional world in *Shame* when he writes: “The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality” (*Shame* 22). Cleverly, Rushdie manages here not only to construct a fictional world, but to also clearly refer to the real world of which he is a part, occasionally telling

details from his own real life, while noting its distance from the story of his novel, despite being contained within it (*Shame* 19-22). As in the use of errata, the use of a fictional world illustrates the difficulty of historical reference, while simultaneously insisting on a reality outside of the discourse of the novel.²⁴ That is, although Rushdie's real life is not part of his alternate Pakistan, he includes himself in the novel about that other Pakistan, installing the real world parodically within its fictional counterpart.

In this regard, Rushdie's review of Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* is instructive. Rushdie points to how Gilliam's film configures an alternative world, a world in which the crushing pessimism, bureaucracy and foreclosed dreams of the real world are combated. "In *Brazil*, flight represents the imagining spirit; so it turns out that we are being told something very strange about the world of the imagination — that it is, in fact, *at war* with the 'real' world, the world in which things inevitably get worse and in which centres cannot hold" ("The Location of *Brazil*" 122). This description of Gilliam's *Brazil* applies very precisely to *Midnight's Children*, in which Rushdie creates an alternative world in which metaphors come true and hope exists. As in *Brazil*, however, this alternative world meets reality, and the power of that alternative then seems to be limited at best, when both Sam in *Brazil* and the members of the MCC in *Midnight's Children* meet their ultimate demise. Rushdie reminds us, however, that the idea Gilliam's film

presents, the idea of “the opposition of imagination to reality [...] is of great importance , because it reminds us that we are not helpless; that to dream is to have power” (122). This is, indeed, precisely the function of the fictional world created in *Midnight’s Children*, to remind us that even the most far-flung fantasies, hopes, and dreams, can have application to our daily life, if we take those fantasies and examine what is real within them. In this, the alternative world is configured neither as imitation of the real one, nor as inviolably separate. Rather, it has a rhetorical relationship to its counterpart, offering an alternative where none initially appears to exist.

This is precisely the claim Walsh makes for fictional worlds, denying the poststructural account of historical reference as failed imitation *and* the fictional worlds model of a textual world disconnected in any substantive way from the real one.²⁵ In opposition to both schools of thought, Walsh insists on focusing on a text’s “fictionality”: its positioning of itself as fiction and what rhetorical significance this has. Focusing on the fictionality of Rushdie’s novel, as Walsh suggests but never undertakes, helps to untangle the function of literalized metaphor and its relationship to material referentiality. It is all too easy to assert that the function of literalized metaphor in *Midnight’s Children* is to reveal the “abuse of language” or catachresis functional in traditional historical accounts of India and in general, leading us once again to the conclusion that the novel is

merely an exposé of the failure of historical narrative. Looking more closely at the fictional world of *Midnight's Children*, however, it is clear that this is not the case. Again, it is one of the central tenets of fictional worlds theory that most fictional worlds sketch out the parts of that world that deviate from our own, while the reader is left to fill in the rest, importing details from the real world. Already then, the world of the real seeps into the fictional India Saleem presents to us, and the metaphorical cannot be completely separated from the real, just as the reverse is shown to be true by de Man. More important, however, is the comparison and commentary this model allows upon the real world, even if, in theory, this world is considered to be completely separate.

As Michael Riffaterre argues, the layering of metaphor and tropes in all literary fiction functions to alert the reader that this is “a circuitous artificial version of the story that could have been told more simply.” That is, it alerts the reader that it is their responsibility to mentally reconstruct a “pretransformation text,” a version of the story not so “twisted” or so dominated by metaphor and trope (Riffaterre xv). Rushdie’s simultaneous allegiance to metaphor and history makes the notion of the reader and the “pretransformation text” even more relevant than in those texts that are only theoretically mimetic. For Rushdie, the pretransformation text is history itself, and the layering of metaphor, while providing a certain type of truth, should not and cannot *lie* about that

text.²⁶ Instead, the reader is rhetorically instructed to restructure that text from the one they are given, that of the fictional world.

To look closely, then, at the world Rushdie has designed, is to find an interesting type of utopia, a utopia in which the linguistic/metaphorical *telling* of a story is, theoretically speaking, consistent and coterminous with the events narrated. It is a world of transparent referentiality where we no longer have to worry about things *not* being as they appear, because the expressions, metaphors, and comparisons used are, magically it seems, true.²⁷ Despite this referential utopia, it soon becomes clear to the reader that this world is not free of inaccuracies or assertions that do not turn out to be true. First, there are the liberal sprinkling of errata cited above, which, when seen in this light, are certainly *not* on a continuum with the literalized metaphors, but rather contradict their function, introducing error where the referential utopia would seem to deny this possibility. In addition to these errata, there are the fairly extensive collection of lies and conscious propagations of untruths. So, the referential utopia Rushdie creates does not quite have the transparent mimeticism and easy accessibility to facts we might expect, illustrating a clear distinction between the catachreses Locke inveighs against and the various other forms of error that inhabit not only our world, but that of *Midnight's Children* as well.

While many of the references to lies and untruths are part of a withering critique of the Pakistani government's means of political and social control, perhaps the most significant instance of lying is when Saleem first admits to an intentional falsehood:

To tell the truth, I lied about Shiva's death. My first out-and-out lie—although my presentation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-hundred-and-thirty-five-day-long midnight was perhaps excessively romantic, and certainly contradicted by the available meteorological data. Still and all, whatever anyone may think, lying doesn't come easily to Saleem, and I'm hanging my head in shame as I confess. [...] Why then, this single barefaced lie? (529)

As it turns out, Saleem has no clear idea of what became of Shiva after Saleem's release from the Widows' hostel. As he then continues to explain, his lie is motivated by his fear of what may happen to him if Shiva *does* survive. He hopes that by wishing for and narrating Shiva's death, it may be true .

That's why I fibbed anyway; for the first time, I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred. My present fear put a gun into Roshanara Shetty's hand; with the ghost of Commander Sabarmati looking over my shoulder, I enabled her to bribe coquette worm her way into his cell [...] in short, the memory of one of my earliest crimes created the [invented] circumstances of my last. (529-30)

Here, Saleem openly contradicts what is the standard interpretation of *Midnight's Children*, that is, that the novel suggests that referential nonfiction (history, autobiography, etc.) *do* create events simply by their narration and that there is no difference between these arts and lying, *per se*, or fiction, in particular. Here, by pointing

to one incident in which a lie *does* occur, and clearly so, Rushdie asserts the crucial distinction between “fibbing” and narrating, as such. In fact, the comparison between this particular lie and literalized metaphor as a mode of narration is invoked explicitly in the first of the two passages above. Whereas the claim that Shiva died at the murderous hands of Roshanara Shetty turns out to be an outright falsehood, the metaphor Saleem provides us for the emergency, while excessively romantic and one of the more outlandish examples of literalized metaphor, is not, or not quite, a lie. Rather, there is in this, as in the examples described above, quite a bit of metaphorical truth in this statement. What’s more, when Saleem offers that his claims about the dark night of the emergency do not match with the actual weather reports from these days, he refers to the weather in the real world, or the pretransformation text, not in the fictional world he normally narrates to us, for in that world such strange meteorological events would not necessarily be so strange. Even in that world, however, a lie is a lie and not a metaphor, literal or otherwise, as Moraes Zogoiby explains to Uma Sarasvati in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*.²⁸

This crucial difference is further highlighted by the comparison between the episode of “Commander Sabarmati” and that of the proposed murder of Shiva. The Sabarmati, incident, based on the rather infamous Nanavati affair,²⁹ involves the

Commander's shooting of Sabarmati's wife, Lila, and her lover, the film magnate Homi Catrack. Saleem claims responsibility for this turn of events because he tips the Commander to the existence of the affair. In the hopes that the exposé of Lila Sabarmati's affair will somehow scare off his own mother from her platonic meetings with ex-husband Nadir Khan at the Pioneer Café, Saleem sends the Commander a note saying, "COMMANDER SABARMATI/ WHY DOES YOUR WIFE GO TO COLABA/ CAUSEWAY ON SUNDAY MORNING?" (312). In the process, Saleem partakes in his "first attempt" at rearranging history, by cutting out stories and events from contemporary newspapers in order to create his collage-style note to the Commander. Here Saleem takes real events and through their reorganization, metaphorically "creates" a new one. In the end, Saleem is quick to call himself the murderer of Homi Catrack, who dies at the Commander's hands. Although Saleem undoubtedly plays a part in the tragic events,³⁰ it would be unfair to call him the literal, or legal, murderer of Catrack, although in the novel's practice of literalizing metaphor, his metaphorical share of the blame is easily transformed into actual guilt.

The case of Roshanara Shetty, however, is different, even if the ghost of Commander Sabarmati metaphorically peers over Saleem's shoulder. In the latter story, Roshanara is one of the many upper-class socialites who partake in sexual slumming with

Shiva, the biological son of Ahmed and Amina Sinai who is raised by the beggar, Wee Willie Winkie. Saleem's narration of Roshanara's efforts to slip into Shiva's prison cell and kill him for saddling her with a crazy bastard son (526) turns out to be a complete invention, marking a clear distinction between a purely textual invention and a real occurrence, albeit one sparked by a textual intervention and then retold in narrative form. For although Saleem at one point asserts that "in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can persuade his audience to believe" (325), here it becomes clear that, for Saleem, although the past exists only in memory, it is still an illusion to believe that it is "possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred." Events occur or they do not, and although our efforts to recall or recreate them may be difficult at best and futile at worst, words do not create the actions they describe, explicitly denying Hayden White's claim that reality is indeed created by the narrative form. Saleem's role in the Sabarmati affair may make him temporarily forget this, but he soon releases the fantasy he has about the power of his own narration. While Saleem can take some of the blame for the murder of Catrack, he cannot take the blame for something that did not occur, the murder of Shiva, only for the lies he told about it.

“What’s Real and What’s True”

The remorse Saleem shows for lying to his readership certainly equals, and perhaps exceeds, the guilt he seems to feel for the death of Homi Catrack. Like the errata or factual errors, Saleem commits, lies are identified as a transgression of the reader’s trust, a violation of the unwritten contract that joins the reader to the writer/autobiographer/historian. While Saleem and Padma, the figure of the reader in the novel, may disagree on the preferable mode of storytelling, with Padma preferring a more linear, realistic account of events, it is agreed between them that Saleem will not lie about his life and will make as few errors as possible. When Saleem violates this unspoken agreement, he feels pangs of guilt that he does not when indulging in his more metaphorical brand of storytelling or in his less linear approach to historical narrative.³¹

In this, it is clear again that the unavoidable manipulation and deviation from material experience that both metaphor and narrative create is not equivalent to intentional falsification or factual error. The construction of a fictional world in which metaphor and actual experience are coterminous allows Rushdie to draw this distinction, for in this world, lies and mistakes still are common occurrences and prevent a transparent historical representation, even in a world in which, within the logic of poststructural theory, such transparent representation would be possible.

Again, the large-scale political and social commentary accomplished through this distinction between fictions/metaphors and lies, is through the comparison of India and Pakistan. Saleem proposes India to be a land of metaphor, narrative, and excesses of figural representation, while Pakistan is seen to be the land of lies, falsehoods and intentional attempts to mislead. Like Gilliam's land of dreams, in *Midnight's Children* India thus becomes the land of infinite possibility, as in this fictional world the metaphors we invoke, and the narratives we generate are precisely those which, at the very least, have the possibility of coming true. On the other hand, the unrealities or falsehoods embodied in Pakistan are precisely those things which are not true, even if they are asserted by those in power. As such, metaphor and narrative, literally in the world of the novel and metaphorically in our own, open up possibilities and opportunities, political, social and otherwise, while lies and falsehoods foreclose those opportunities. Metaphor and narrative are here seen as the stimuli to the social and political imagination which is necessary for change, while falsehoods, lies, and unrealities are positioned as powers for stasis and lack of movement. This may help to untangle one of the most enigmatic statements Saleem makes in the novel. In responding to S. P. Butt's rhetorical question "what's real any more? what's true?" (90), Saleem carefully separates the two seeming synonyms:

“What’s real and what’s true aren’t necessarily the same.” *True*, for me, was from my earliest days something hidden inside stories Mary Pereira told me: Mary my ayah who was nothing more and less than a mother; Mary who knew everything about all of us. *True* was a thing concealed just over the horizon towards which the fisherman’s finger pointed in the picture on my wall, while the young Raleigh listened to his tales. Now, writing this in my Anglepoised light, I measure truth against those early things: Is this how Mary would have told it? I ask. Is this what that fisherman would have said? (90; emphasis in original)

Again, this strange passage is often interpreted as a relativist deconstruction of the nature of reality and of truth. That is, by separating reality and truth, Saleem seems to take something away from each of these concepts, especially when truth is then collated with narrative skill, as opposed to a fidelity to the facts or verisimilitude. Inherent in this separation of the real and the true, however, is their mutual separation from the false.

While the real here seems to correlate with the kind of literal representation of events that it is impossible to, at every point, reproduce in textual form (à la de Man), the true is the artful telling of those events with a metaphorical correspondence to the actual. Despite the near correspondence of these two within the world of literalized metaphor, they are never precisely the same. Neither of these, however, can be equivalent to the lies and falsehoods that have neither literal nor metaphorical correspondence to lived experience.

While the real and the true are then not precisely the same, particularly in the real world, there is a correspondence between them that is denied to falsehood and unreality.

Rushdie’s critique of the social and political situation in both nations, then, comes down

to a critique of a lack of imagination, as neither the leaders and the people of India nor those of Pakistan seem to have the capacity to make the truth of narrative and metaphor a reality as he does in the creation of his fictional world. The rhetorical positioning of his alternative world is, however, an injunction to do just that.

The initial separation of India and Pakistan is misleading, however, because the novel's critique of Pakistan is soon reflected back upon India as well. Both of these critiques are accomplished through the deployment of the "midnight's children" themselves. Clearly, the children are meant to be seen as a metaphorical microcosm of India as a whole. Their initial number, one thousand and one, reflects the number of Scheherazade's *Arabian Nights*, itself a synecdoche for an infinitude of possible fictions.³² In this tale, storytelling becomes the means by which Scheherazade can forestall her eventual death and her imagination becomes essential to her own survival. This individual plot is, in *Midnight's Children*, transferred to the fate of a nation, as the 1,001 midnight's children are representative of an abundance of imaginative and metaphorical possibilities for the nation as a whole.

Where Saleem initially is able to see into the minds of all of his Indian countrymen, after his bulging temples crash into the hollows in Sonny Ibrahim's forehead, he is able to not only see and hear the surface noise of many minds, but can

also access the “pure language” beneath the confusing babel of languages of only the 1,001 midnight’s children (223-4). Not coincidentally, the moment of Saleem’s capacity to break through the language barrier separating the children coincides with Nehru’s division of the country into linguistic territories. Rushdie’s capacity to imagine the coming together of those linguistically separated is contrasted with the inability of politicians to imagine such communication. In addition, the revelation that Saleem is only one of many children born simultaneously with their nation spreads his metaphorical connection to India more diffusely. The Midnight’s Children Conference (MCC) provides a much broader cross-section of race, caste, and class than Saleem ever could on his own, providing a microcosm of nation as a whole. So, while Saleem is, himself, a metaphor for India, he is only one possible India, while the other midnight’s children are likewise opportunities for the nation. That some of these opportunities have already been foreclosed is clear when it is revealed that 420 of the 1,001 children have died before the first mental meeting of the MCC can be convened.

Despite this setback, Saleem consistently and insistently configures the members of the MCC as the hope for the future of India, as “a thousand and one possibilities,” (240) even if these possibilities are, by real world standards, impossibilities: children who can step into and out of mirrors, multiply fish, become werewolves, change their sex,

divine water, inflict damage with words, eat metal, fly, perform alchemy, and predict the future. From the beginning, it is established that either there are no similar children in Pakistan or that Saleem is incapable of seeing them (235). Again, the notion of the imaginary nation becomes literal as arbitrary political borders also become the metaphorical limits of imagination, and beyond these borders imaginative national possibilities are both currently absent and denied for the future. While on the Indian side of the border, Saleem communes with the magical MCC, on the other side he discovers that: “Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and peppercorns [...] I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I [...] had dreamed” (350). In this passage, the real offspring of partition are associated with Pakistan, while the imagined and the magical (the MCC) inhabit India.

Likewise, while Saleem’s sister was once a font of narrative possibilities, burning shoes and talking to animals, a move to Pakistan changes her nature, with Saleem “observing the Monkey, once so rebellious and wild, adopting expressions of demureness and submission *which must, at first, have seemed false* even to her; [...] revealing the streak of Puritan fanaticism which she had hinted at” (350; emphasis mine). Like India, Saleem’s sister is divided into two distinct pieces, the “Brass Monkey” of India, and the

Jamila Singer of Pakistan, with the former being preferred to the latter, although Saleem does fall in love with her second incarnation.³³ Consistent with the binaries delineated above, the former is associated with storytelling and imagination, and the latter with both the real and the false. India and the Brass Monkey thus become a microcosmic representation of the alternative fictional world of literalized metaphor in which possibilities come true and change is possible, while Pakistan and Jamila Singer provide a counterbalancing microcosm of the real in which such flights of fancy do not and cannot occur. While the false is initially only associated with the Pakistani side, it soon becomes clear that lies, political domination, and the violent administration of hegemony occur on *both* sides of the border.

While Saleem argues that in Pakistan there is a “Divorce between news and reality” (399), it becomes evident that such a divorce also exists in India.

On the night of September 22, air-raids took place over every Pakistani city. (Although All-India Radio...) Aircraft, real or fictional, dropped actual or mythical bombs. It is, accordingly, either a matter of fact or a figment of a diseased imagination that of the only three bombs to hit Rawalpindi and explode, the first landed on the bungalow in which my grandmother Naseem Aziz and my aunty Pia were hiding under the table. (407)

In this passage, the distinction between India and Pakistan is initially maintained, as the facts of the bombing are not transformed into lies as they might be from the Pakistani side, but into “myth” or “fiction” by All-India Radio. Nevertheless, the ironic tone in this

passage indicates a discrepancy between the truth of what occurred in the Indian bombing of Pakistan and the myth that no bombing occurred. Here, as in Woolf's description of the victims of bombing in *Three Guineas*, the reality of the dead victims of Indian bombing cannot be obscured or palliated by mythmaking and fiction. Instead, it is clear that India too is capable of lies even if some of the details presented, particularly the targeting of Saleem's family, are undoubtedly the province of fiction. Indeed, both Pakistan and India are equally seen to be the perpetrators not only of fictions, with the concomitant possibility of metaphorical truth, but also of lies, correlated with the propagation of unrealities: "on the radio, what destruction, what mayhem! In the first five days of the war Voice of Pakistan announced the destruction of more aircraft than India ever possessed; in eight days, All-India Radio massacred the Pakistan Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man" (405). While, certainly, the Radio itself does not massacre people, there is some metaphorical truth present here, as the lies and deceptions propagated by both governments and their media outlets are part and parcel of the war machinery that perpetuates religious hatred, national superiority, and, ultimately, eliminates the possibility for growth and cooperation, rather than providing it.

The division between the possibilities of India and their lack in Pakistan is not, then, as unassailable as it originally appears, just as the division between the fictional

world and its real alternative are not inviolable. First, from this division, it would seem that the transformation of metaphor into reality should only occur within India's borders, but Saleem retains his magical powers of smell in the Land of the Pure, and suffers from a metaphorical amnesia that becomes literal. So, while only one nation seems to contain imaginative possibilities, both actually do. Likewise, while one nation seems to foreclose these possibilities, so the other soon does the same. As Saleem notes, his perception of the abilities of the members of the MCC do not last forever, nor does the promise of the MCC. In fact, the positioning of Pakistan as a land of unrealities and lies to be compared with the infinite realities and possibilities of India soon serves to show the similarities between the two nations rather than their differences. While it is true that Saleem's first lost contact with the MCC coincides with his first trip to Pakistan, he soon loses contact with the MCC permanently when he undergoes sinus surgery, as arranged by his parents, in India. Saleem's personal lost access to the minds of the members of the MCC is not merely a matter of epistemology, for it is not only his knowledge of the members that is lost, but as with virtually everything else in the novel, Saleem's surgery bears metaphorical weight as well. That is, the tenuous unity of the conference begins to dissolve even before the operation, just as the possible unification of India's diverse peoples crumbles.

Just as the Chinese armies come over the Himalayas to humiliate Indian troops, the various members of the conference find reasons to leave: the predictor of the future tires of being ignored, the alchemist is lured away by the possibilities of gold, the beautiful twins have plenty of lovers without the help of the conference, and the Brahmin children decide that they do not want their thoughts to touch those of the untouchables. In short, the divisions inherent in the nation of India come to apply to the conference as well: greed, lust, gender, race, religious, caste and class divisions. It is then no surprise that the imaginative possibility of transcending these divisions begins to fall apart. That is, the nation of metaphor and fiction begins to resemble its other, and to become a nation of foreclosed possibilities, lost narratives, and lost opportunities: the real world itself. Likewise, the fictional world of literalized metaphor slowly inches closer and closer to its real world counterpart.

Saleem hopes for a way out of this predicament: "Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us! We must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma; for only by being other, by being new, can we fulfill the promise of our birth" (306). While Saleem cries out for the members of the conference to allow a third principle to overcome the traditional binaries separating India's citizens, such a principle does not appear. Rushdie's interest in a third principle or an outside possibility to overcome traditional social and political dead-ends is evident not only here, but also, for

instance, in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, in which the Anglophile Darius Cama proposes a third principle of outsidership as a means of overcoming his own intellectual and social dilemmas. Likewise, the Rushdiean creation of a fictional world to comment upon and critique our own functions as a third principle, something explicitly outside of our own experience, but with the ability to comment upon it. However, the difficulties encountered by the MCC also provide an internal critique of this third principle and a comment upon the limits of its usefulness, as well as the limits of the usefulness of the fictional world itself.

This internal critique is advanced most devastatingly by Shiva, the real midnight's child, who is displaced by Saleem.

No, little rich boy; there is no third principle; there is only money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, and right-and-left; there is only me-against-the-world! The world is not ideas, rich boy; the world is no place for dreamers or their dreams; the world, little Snotnose, is things. Things and their makers rule the world; look at Birla, and Tata, and all the powerful: they make things. For things, the country is run. Not for people. For things, America and Russia send aid; but five hundred million stay hungry. When you have things, then there is time to dream; when you don't, you fight. (307)

Remarkable in this passage and throughout Shiva's contributions to the debates in the MCC is the degree to which Rushdie predicts, precludes and provides the arguments of his materialist, Marxist, and post-colonial critics who make the same arguments against *Midnight's Children* as a worthwhile historical commentary that Shiva makes against Saleem's dreams. Like Saleem, Rushdie is often seen as a dreamer, indulging in flights-of-fancy and historical pipe dreams rather than presenting the world of things and

acknowledging that the only way to approach such a world is to fight. Like these critics, Shiva notes that there is nothing outside the world of things, the material world, and that the only resistance is political and social resistance, and particularly violence. That is, dreams of alternative realities and far-flung possibilities are only dreams, and we are best served by dealing with reality, things as they are, not as they might be, and by material resistance.. Again, Rushdie's choice of Saleem as narrator and his production of abundant narratives seems to suggest that Shiva's alternate point of view, like its originator, is meant to be frowned upon.³⁴ To look closely at the results of Saleem's dreaming and the fate of the MCC is to come to a radically different conclusion and to see that Rushdie has more in common with his materially-minded critics, and with Shiva, than it first appears.

While the division between the imagination and promise of India and the lies and social and thought control of Pakistan seems clear at first, as the novel progresses towards the regime of Indira Gandhi it becomes clear that India begins to resemble the Pakistani failure of imagination more than it differs from it. While the lies perpetrated by All-India Radio occur under the 1965 watch of Prime Minister Shastri, in very short order, Indira becomes the Prime Minister and during her established Emergency, the Widow, as Saleem calls her, imprisons all of the extant members of the MCC, surgically

removes their magical powers, and sterilizes them. Only Shiva escapes. Here, the imaginative possibilities for the nation that the children represent comes to an abrupt conclusion. Certainly, what is centrally located in this abrupt ending of the powers of the MCC is Rushdie's unequivocal critique of the Emergency and the Prime Minister who administered it. Here, Indira is, in many ways, analogized with the Pakistani leadership (Ayub Khan, General Yahyah, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Saleem's uncle General Zulfikar), as she is depicted as a dictator who forcibly establishes what is true and even what is narratively possible, shutting down all of the imaginative, social, and political opportunities represented by the midnight's children. As Rushdie later writes of Indira, "She told the world the horror stories about the Emergency were all fictions; and the world allowed her to get away with the lie" ("Dynasty" 48). Again, the crucial distinction between fictions and lies is foregrounded, with the supposed fictions assuming the position of truth resistant to Indira's lies.³⁵

While this critique of both Indira Gandhi and her son, Sanjay, stands, the symbolic weight of the MCC prevents the demise of its members from being merely a local and specific political critique of a particular individual or regime. Shiva's initial critique of Saleem and the MCC predicts their demise, because, as Shiva notes, the world is built not on dreams and imagination but on things, and the Rushdean flights of fancy

that allow the MCC to even exist must at some point be supplemented and informed by, if not abandoned to, the world of things. It is at the moment that the members of the MCC are deprived of their powers that the fictional world of literalized metaphor intersects most clearly with our own. No longer are metaphors real and no longer are magical powers possible.³⁶ Rather, the only possible resistance to Indira's regime as presented in the novel is the resistance of real people oppressed by power.

Indeed, the special nature of India being the land of infinite truths and realities as opposed to the lies of Pakistan is dramatically undercut long before this moment, not only in the opposing propaganda machines of national radio, but also in the meeting of the leading generals of India and Pakistan's armies. Sam Manekshaw (of India) and Tiger Nāzi (of Pakistan), old friends, congratulate one another on their war efforts and mutually agree to lie about the atrocities of war: "[...] General Sam, 'Listen old sport: one hears such damn awful lies. Slaughters, old boy, mass graves, special units called CUTIA or some damn thing, developed for purposes of rooting out opposition ... no truth in it, I suppose?' And the Tiger, 'Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence Activities? Never heard of it'" (453).³⁷ The exaggerated use of British English and the contradictory simultaneous specification of the CUTIA acronym and denial of its knowledge lends a kind of humor to this exchange, but it is a gallows humor, for signaled is not only the

death of those lying in mass graves, but also the death of the distinction between the two nations that held out hope for one of them. Here lies become truth and truth is then nothing but lies. The sterilization of the midnight's children that follows is then largely a symbolic resolution of something that has already occurred. It is perhaps for this reason that Saleem, who represents the former nation so clearly, begins to disassociate himself from his homeland. Where once he was proud of the connection and insisted up his influence, begins to object to it; "*Why, alone of all the more-than-five-hundred-million, should I have to bear the burden of history*" (457; emphasis original). It is here, when India too is identified as a nation of lies, that Saleem no longer feels part of its story.

Saleem also describes how this process is completed, when the Widow finally drains both him and the other members of the MCC completely of narrative options and his dreams for a better future in India:

I no longer want to be anything except what who I am. Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (457-58)

Saleem denies his privileged connection to the nation as a whole, and, indeed, his status as special font of narrative and meaning. In short, he loses his metaphorical role

and becomes normal, not “particularly exceptional” but a real person, like anyone else. In this, Shiva seems to be correct, the search for meaning beyond action and reaction, oppression and struggle, is eliminated and the difference between this fictional world and the real world is eliminated, along with the particular hopefulness the elimination of the distance between metaphor and reality allows. In this, the novel suggests a need to face the real world of things, of facts and lies, and of abandoning the world of metaphor, even if there is some truth contained within it. With this abandonment comes the birth of Saleem’s son, who is identified as more cautious, more stubborn, tougher, less prone to action, but more likely to take significant action. In short, he is more realistic, less idealistic, and more likely to make a difference. Hardly the dreamer that Saleem is and that Rushdie is sometimes accused of being, Aadam seems poised to take on the mantle of resistance and struggle promoted by Rushdie’s more materialist critics, positioned as “stronger, harder, more resolute than I” (507).³⁸

Politically, socially, and ethically, however, Saleem’s newfound realism leads him not to a mode of struggle, and a contestation of power, but to a quietism and resignation that has incontrovertible significance. Saleem asserts to his fellow midnight’s children: “Politics, children; at the best of times is a bad dirty business. We should have avoided it, I should never have dreamed of purpose, I am coming to the conclusion that

privacy, the small individual lives of men, are preferable to all this inflated macrocosmic activity” (518). The reader is then left to wonder if *this* is the conclusion that is meant to emerge from Rushdie’s opus: a stoic resignation of struggle and opposition, just when materialism takes center stage instead of metaphor. With the removal of the special powers of the members of the MCC, comes the removal of hope both from Saleem and from India. This is what Saleem calls a “sperectomy” (521).

Over the course of the novel, then, Rushdie introduces a “third principle,” by creating a fictional world that merges the normally separated purviews of metaphor and reality. This third principle, although self-consciously outside of our lived experience, has a rhetorical force upon our own world, suggesting that metaphor, narrative, and imagination can provide us with truths about our own world even if those truths are not literally real, or do not touch the world at every point. In *Midnight’s Children*, metaphor and narrative provide hopeful possibilities for political and social change, imagining worlds beyond the one in which we live, worlds which may have some connection to the future world which lies ahead of us, but which is only fiction to our present. The unrealistic idealism of this perspective is, however, tempered by the critique of Shiva who warns us that the real world we inhabit is populated by things not metaphors or fictional worlds, and as India is slowly drained of its fantastic metaphorical properties, it

becomes evident that Rushdie's enthusiasm for a metaphorical world is, at the very least, characterized by a realistic skepticism and ambivalence. Rushdie recognizes that the real world is characterized by falsehood, lies and abuse of political power and that while a third principle may provide us with hope for the future, that hope can be removed by the exigencies of the lived historical present. Nevertheless, metaphor does have a utility, if a limited one, precisely in its intersections and connections with a type of truth, connections that cannot be seen with lies, even when the real world is full of them.

Narrative and Its Leftovers (Ectomies and Turds)

The sperectomy of Saleem and his fellow members of the MCC is, in all senses but one, the conclusion of the novel, although it is precisely in its inversion of the trajectory of traditional narrative that this conclusion is reached. The one way that it is not the conclusion is in the literal sense that the novel continues, in fits and starts, for another chapter, before Saleem fragments completely into millions of pieces, ending the possibility of his continued narration. In a thematic way, however, the sperectomy is the quintessential conclusion, as it provides the essence of the nonnarratable moment, itself, in Miller's model, an analogue for closure. As I discussed at length in relation to *Waterland*, Miller defines the nonnarratable by the elimination of the dissatisfaction and

inquietude that engenders narrative, and its replacement with satisfaction and realized desires that the conclusion normally signals. In *Midnight's Children*, however, the reverse is the case, with the narratable middle of the novel being characterized not by dissatisfaction and lack but by hope, promise, and possibility. In this case, the nonnarratable is reached through the back door, as narration is normally achieved through dissatisfaction coupled with the *hope* for satisfaction and eliminated when that hope is achieved. Here, narration is not eliminated by the *achievement* of hope's aspirations, but by its excision, making the continued search for satisfaction, and thus continued narration, irrelevant, just as it would be if the hope were realized. Peter Brooks's configuration of narrative desire is similarly inverted here. Where Brooks correlates the end of a narrative with its climactic achievement of male sexual desire, here narratability is concluded through a literal and metaphorical sterilization. While narrative and desire ceases in both cases, the effect is significantly different. The sterilization of the members of the MCC is both symbolically and metaphorically a sterilization of narrative itself, as the MCC, via Scheherazade, has been associated with narrative itself throughout the novel.

This startling inversion of the Miller/Brooks model has striking relevance both for the thematics of fragmentation and unity detailed at the outset of this chapter and for the

claims of constructivist historiography challenged by this study as a whole. Hayden White's model suggests that it is the satisfaction and coherence of meaning endemic to narrative closure that positions it as antithetical to the real. However, in the case of *Midnight's Children*, the close of narration is not associated with coherence and satisfaction, but precisely with dissatisfaction and with an encounter with the real world of chance, individualism, lost opportunities and political struggle. In this sense, closure becomes the encounter with the real as opposed to its denial, in direct contradiction to the relativist historiography that Rushdie's work is typically said to reflect.

Saleem's lost will in the face of such daunting and overpowering realism is then understandable if not completely endorsed by Rushdie or the novel itself. What is clear from the novel's extrapolation of a world of literalized metaphor and from that world's remaining traces in the novel's final chapter is that the literal and limited sense of reality offered by this conclusion denies, rather than affirms, the possibility of political and social action. Nevertheless, Rushdie, despite the negative connotations of the novel's conclusion, is not yet willing to forfeit the future to a grim realism that abandons the hope for change. Indeed, much of the final chapter is dedicated to Saleem's reluctance to continue narrating, after the narratable itself is metaphorically eliminated. On more than

one occasion in this chapter, Saleem observes incidents that would previously have been occasions for abundant storytelling, but self-consciously rejects them.

The second, and strangest, of these incidents, occurs after Saleem has been reunited with his ayah, Mary Pereira, and the narrative has caught up to its narrator, as he describes the writing of the narrative we are reading. During this time, an inexplicable interlude occurs:

Midnight, or thereabouts. A man carrying a folded (and intact) black umbrella walks towards my window from the direction of the railway tracks, stops, squats, shits. Then sees me silhouetted against light and, instead of taking offence at my voyeurism, calls: 'Watch this!' and proceeds to extrude the longest turd I have ever seen. 'Fifteen inches!' he calls, 'How long can you make yours?' Once, when I was more energetic, I would have wanted to tell his life-story; the hour, and his possession of an umbrella, would have been all the connections I needed to begin the process of weaving him into my life, and I have no doubt that I'd have finished by proving his indispensability to anyone who wishes to understand my life and benighted times; but now, I'm disconnected, unplugged, with only epitaphs yet to write. So, waving at the champion defecator, I call back: 'Seven on a good day,' and forget him. (546)

This interlude is so strange and self-contained that it seems to refuse interpretation.³⁹

Still, however, crucial to the episode is its articulation of both Saleem's refusal of continuing narratability and its persistence. While Saleem self-consciously rejects his previous penchant for extravagant storytelling, he nevertheless feels compelled to narrate this strange incident, leaving the sense that he is not as "disconnected, unplugged" as he claims. Indeed, the encounter seems to provide a renewed narratability that was

seemingly eliminated by the sperectomy performed by the Widow's hand. What is still puzzling, however, is the relative importance of the incident itself. Why does Rushdie feel compelled to include it?

The answer may be found, at least somewhat, in an earlier incident, wherein Saleem meets Durga, the new wife of Picture Singh and the wet-nurse for Saleem's adoptive son during Saleem's imprisonment. When Picture, the snake-charming Marxist who serves as de facto leader of the Magician's ghetto, introduces Saleem to Durga, Saleem is less than happy to make her acquaintance: "It is with the greatest reluctance that I admit her into these pages. Her name, even before I met her, had the smell of new things; she represented novelty, beginnings, the advent of new stories events complexities, and I was no longer interested in anything new" (532). As in the later encounter, Saleem's reluctance is not because of any personal animosity towards Durga or Picture, but rather out of an allegiance to the nonnarratable realism he has finally encountered. Durga represents the power of narrative, of new possibilities, and new directions. In short, she represents the hope that has been removed from the novel's protagonist. Interestingly, however, Saleem is forced to admit her to his rapidly concluding narrative out of an allegiance to historical verisimilitude, "once Pictureji informed me that he intended to marry her, I had no option: I shall deal with her, however, as briefly as accuracy permits"

(532). In this instance, accuracy of representation takes precedence over an adherence to the realism of nonnarratability that has drained Saleem of his hope. That is the real, as such, must include narrative and narrative possibility, even after these things seem to have been eliminated. Despite the best efforts of Indira Gandhi, the Emergency, and materialist denial of Rushdiean flights of fancy, narratable leftovers persist and demand to be asserted, precisely because they are true or that they happened. Saleem's ultimate and conclusive defense of his narrative is based on a similar plea: Saleem insists that "it happened that way because that's how it happened" (549), offering that the outlandish and the narratable are not necessarily deviant from historical accuracy. Rather, stories, as such, are part of reality as David Carr has elsewhere asserted (see Chapter One of this study). Here, Rushdie's allegiance to narrative is reasserted, not as an escapist alternative world, but as an unavoidable element of the real world itself, reasserting the hope that was so recently extracted. Consonant with the insistence on verisimilitude is the notion of the narratable leftover, also theorized by Miller, and pervasive not only in *Midnight's Children* but also in the body of Rushdie's work. Miller suggests that there are authors and works whose work "exemplifies a closure at once enforced and effaced" (*Narrative and Its Discontents* 273). Here he refers to the practice of writing complete works that leave room open for sequels or additional narratives. That is, such works have

a clear closure, “but what is left over is demonstrably capable of producing further narrative” (*Narrative* 273). In *Midnight’s Children*, closure is most certainly enforced. In fact, the whole notion of closure is associated with repressive political regimes who, through the use of force, foreclose the possibility of narratable leftovers and dictate a world of rigidly defined possibilities through the manipulation of truth. This enforcement of closure is, however, accompanied by its effacement in the leftovers that are clearly capable of producing other narratives. Because of the self-conscious attention to the nature of narrative in *Midnight’s Children*, such leftovers are clearly identified as such, as Durga is explicitly identified with “new stories events complexities,” while the unidentified man with the umbrella produces a more fetid and material “leftover” which, if the metaphorical parallel holds, has a story even more long and prodigious than Saleem’s own. While Miller argues that the existence of narrative sequels is the best available evidence that such narratable leftovers exist (*Narrative* 273), Rushdie includes and insists upon such leftovers in the final chapter of the singular novel. Likewise, although the stripping away of literalized metaphor and fanciful narratives is associated with the realism of closure, the surplus of narrative leftovers is seen as necessary, precisely because of its adherence to accuracy, because that is “how it happened.”

In this case, as in *Waterland*, the real has a double movement. While the obliteration of the fictional world of literalized metaphor is necessary to confront the real world of political and social abuse of power, there is also a referentiality to the protrusion of new stories and new directions, which may lead the reader out of the seeming dead-end of the former real. While Saleem no longer has the strength to follow the truth, whether literal or metaphorical, of the narratives of Durga and the umbrella-man, Rushdie suggests that we, as readers and writers, must do so, both here and in the revival of the fictional world itself in future novels like *Shame*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. While the crushing loss of hope that is associated with the real world of modern India and the foreclosure of narrative possibility is historically true, so too, suggests Rushdie, is the opening of new narratives and new possibilities that may help in the resistance to power. The dialectic of the enclosed and unified with the contingent and leftover is, in fact, one of the central themes of the novel, but this dialectic itself is positioned as an insistence both on the fidelity to the depressing limitation of possibility that reality embodies, and the simultaneous possibility that it encompasses. Rushdie similarly points to this dialectic in his essay, "Imaginary Homelands."

What I tried to do was to set up a tension in the text, a paradoxical opposition between the form and the content of the narrative. The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo [...] the Indian talent for non-stop self regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it 'teems'. The

form [...] is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy.
(16)

The tragedy here is not particular to Saleem, as he is evidently emblematic of his nation. Nevertheless, it is clear that although the metaphors and narratives that provide the "teeming" hope for the future are systematically extracted by the vicissitudes of history, history itself, not just the form of the novel, indicates that such hope cannot be completely lost. That is, while the form and the content are preferred here as the counterweights of optimism and pessimism, it becomes clear that both narrative form and historical content in and of themselves can be (and indeed inevitably are) both hopeful and despairing. In particular, the novel suggests that referential historical discourse not only reflects both sides of this coin, but is essentially characterized by the dialectic oscillation between them.

Nowhere is this dialectic more clearly expressed than through the personage of Shiva, who both insists upon a fidelity to the limited binary world of "masses-and-classes" and provides the most important narratable leftover in the novel. Shiva, is of course, named explicitly after the Hindu god of destruction and (pro)creation (150), marking these concepts as two sides of the same coin, and predicting his important role in the novel's version of India.⁴⁰ Shiva's role as military hero for Indira's India and his crushing of Saleem between his knees is the symbolic and material realization of his

theoretical antagonism towards Saleem's optimistic doctrine of the third principle. Still, despite the important role Shiva plays in the elimination of the members of the MCC, he also plays an important role in their (re)creation as well. While all of the other members of the MCC are sterilized during the Emergency, Shiva, because of his alliance with Indira and Sanjay, is left to roam freely. Upon his return from the war to liberate Bangladesh, he enjoys the rewards of his popularity by seducing the wives of all of the important men in India, fathering innumerable bastard children along the way (488). Shiva later turns away from the rich women who look down upon him and towards poor and slum-dwelling whores, fathering even more children (491).

Shiva's penchant for fathering not only material children, but also narrative loose ends is somewhat surprising considering his role in shutting down narrative possibilities in the rounding up and sterilization of the members of the MCC. Indeed, Shiva's attitude towards pregnancy reflects his antagonism towards flights of fantasy and narrative possibility. Whenever he impregnates a woman, whether a society lady or a slum-dwelling whore, he immediately loses any sexual attraction for her and abandons her and her child. Nevertheless, while Shiva is an emblem of destruction, he also literally populates Rushdie's India with a new set of midnight's children, this group encapsulated in Aadam Sinai but containing a variety of hopes, possibilities, and stories like their

predecessors. In this, the novel suggests that hope and narrative possibility cannot be completely eliminated, but perhaps they must come from a grounding in materialism, in the duality of masses-and-classes, the things that Shiva contends are more important than Saleem's fantasies. Certainly, the achievement of nonnarratability encapsulated by the sperectomy is once more undercut here by the presence of narratable "leftovers". While the reader never actually hears or sees the stories of Shiva's offspring, their narratable status as genetic and thematic heirs to the members of the MCC is clear. That is, while Shiva has, unsurprisingly, undergone "voluntary vasectomy" (524), Saleem is sure to make the irrelevance of the operation clear:

Saleem begins to laugh, wholeheartedly without stinting [...] I was remembering stories told me by Parvati. [...] the legendary tales of the war hero's philandering, of the legions of bastards swelling in the unectomied bellies of great ladies and whores; I laughed because Shiva, destroyer of the midnight children, had also fulfilled the other role lurking in his name, the function of [...] Shiva-the-procreator, so that at this very moment in the boudoirs and hovels of the nation, a new generation of children, begotten by midnight's darkest child, was being raised towards the future. Every Widow manages to forget something important. (524)

The importance of what the Widow has forgotten is precisely the renewal of hope and narrative possibility that the series of "ectomies" has eliminated. In this, Shiva embodies the dialectic specified above. He is both the crushing pessimism that the sterilization of the midnight's children exemplifies and the "teeming" optimism of possibility that the narrative form of the novel reflects. That is, while Saleem's narrative

reaches a condition of nonnarratability, the existence of Shiva's multitudinous children asserts the continuing presence of narratability itself, as do Durga and the umbrella-man. Importantly, as well, both sides of the dialectic are emblematic of the novel's specification of the real. That is while the achievement of nonnarratability involves the elimination of the fantasy-world of literalized metaphor and an encounter with the world of things, the renewal of narratability is paradoxically also characterized by the need for historical accuracy, as Saleem reluctantly includes events that do not fit into the unity of his newly realistic narrative because "that's how it happened".

Gandhi and the Ethics of Inclusion

Midnight's Children then has a conflicted or, at the very least, double view of what historical reality is and how we can access it, but it does not dismiss the possibility of such access. While Hayden White and narrativist historiography argue that the achievement of a unified form and coherent explanation of past events must necessarily involve a deviation from historical accuracy, Rushdie's inversion of the narratable and the nonnarratable suggest that a unified form can resist explanation and, in doing so, more closely reference the historical past. At the same time, however, Rushdie's work acknowledges White's most essential critique, that the adherence to a particular narrative

or story will necessarily exclude important events and shape others. This brings us back to the importance of Saleem's errata. Like Saleem's reluctant inclusion of the narratable leftovers in the concluding chapter, the errata are real elements/episodes of history that do not fit within the unified form of Saleem's narrative, yet because they are both important and true in the conventional sense, they must be included within the novel's attempt to portray the past accurately.

Through the chain of signification offered in the novel, Saleem is metaphorically coterminous with his nation, making him also literally so in the fictional world of literalized metaphor. Because Rushdie proffers metaphor as that which holds truths even if they are deviant from historical verisimilitude, Saleem's autobiography has the capacity to reveal various metaphorical truths about India and its surrounding environs. However, Saleem is not merely a metaphor for India, but is also, in the context of the fictional world, an independent subject. Saleem's duality is clearest when his efforts to make his story correspond to his nation's generate factual errors. As these errata indicate, there are certain parts of Saleem's life as individual subject that cannot be integrated with that of India. As is the case with the narratable leftovers and the nonnarratable conclusion, Saleem's allows for the inclusion of both metaphorical truth and factual accuracy, by revealing and drawing attention to the factual errors that metaphorical truth

can generate. Once again, Rushdie and Saleem provide the satisfying meaning that accompanies a “longing for form” as well as the loose ends or leftovers that are, nevertheless, also part of the truth.

In this case, it is the “leftovers” which we might consider to be non-narratable, or, at the very least, not narrated, despite their inclusion. While Saleem’s narrative asserts that Gandhi died on the same date as the premiere of *The Lovers of Kashmir*, the correction occurs outside of that narrative, as a leftover that is both absent from narration and present in the text: an antinarrative moment. In the errata, then, the real world’s events encroach upon and interject into the narrative proper, as the real world begins to crack into the fictional world in the later *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. They do so, however, without superseding or replacing the fictional world’s version of events. This creates something of a shadow narrative or a ghostly presence that haunts the narrative as it is presented to us, with the real world’s facts and dates always threatening to invalidate the metaphorical truths of Saleem’s narration, as Saleem himself suggests when he inquires whether one of his errors invalidates the “entire fabric” of his narrative. While the primary narrative never quite collapses as it seems it might, it does come closer and closer to meeting with the real world, instead of deviating from it. It is within the tension between the fictional world of literalized metaphor and the shadow narration of its real

counterpart that Rushdie points to the dialectic of historical representation that might help in efforts to access the reality of the past. Through this dialectic, Rushdie suggests that we need not abandon metaphorical discourse in our representation of reality, as long as we also acknowledge its limitations and supplement it with the unnarrated facts that unitary narratives and metaphors tend to exclude.

Indeed, it is no accident that the largest mistake, or at least the one bearing the novel's most textual attention, surrounds Mahatma Gandhi, for it is on his personage that most histories of contemporary India linger, and which Rushdie virtually ignores.

However, Gandhi's centrality in the shadow narrative of the errata signals his simultaneous importance both to the novel and to Rushdie's version of the real. Both Gandhi's actual history and his treatment in significant popularized narratives, particularly Attenborough's film, *Gandhi*, is central to Rushdie's treatment of historical referentiality and the ethics of inclusion that define it.

Neil ten Kortenaar makes the provocative observation that Rushdie's near exclusion of Gandhi from his novel is a social and political polemic against the Gandhian influence upon Indian history and politics. Indeed, he argues, Rushdie cleverly promotes a liberal secular democratic ideal by replacing the real world's Gandhi with the fictional world's Shiva, unfairly biasing readers towards Saleem's own view of politics and away

from another possible alternative: “the Gandhian and the transcendental” (“Allegory of History” 60). He additionally argues that Rushdie replaces the standard Indian political dichotomy of Nehru vs. Gandhi with Saleem vs. Shiva, correlating Gandhi with the instrument of destruction and violence that is most antithetical to the Mahatma’s ideals (“Allegory of History” 59-60). Rushdie is unabashedly humanist, secular and democratic in his political sympathies advocating such classic liberal values as “liberty, equality, and fraternity” in *Shame*. However, the characterization of Rushdie’s political maneuvering in *Midnight’s Children* as manipulative and Anti-Gandhian in the pursuit of secular democracy misses the point somewhat. This misinterpretation does, however, help to reveal Gandhi’s central role within Rushdiean historical representation and the ethics that arise from it.

While Saleem never seems to consider Gandhi relevant to the story of India that he is narrating, Rushdie both acknowledges and overtly points to the fact that the Mahatma’s exclusion threatens to unravel the entire fabric of Saleem’s liberal humanist narrative. It is not only at the moment of Gandhi’s death that his shadowy absent presence haunts the primary narrative. Rather, the Amritsar Massacre that is presented in some detail through the eyes of Saleem’s “grandfather” Dr. Aziz is committed in response to a Gandhi-inspired protest and strike. Again, while Aziz is the central figure

here (and Aziz himself is clearly associated with Nehru, not Gandhi, throughout the novel), Gandhi's influence and importance towers over the event, even though he is mentioned only briefly.

Likewise, when Saleem offhandedly remarks that Indira Gandhi is no relation to the Mahatma, it seems to be merely a throwaway line that serves to simultaneously provide some historical context for one of the novel's central characters and to further indict Indira's policies and politics. "She [Indira] was not related to 'Mahatma' M. K. Gandhi; her surname was the legacy of her marriage, in 1952, to one Feroze Gandhi, who became known as 'the nation's son-in-law'" (501).⁴¹ While this passage does serve both of these purposes, it simultaneously serves to emphasize Rushdie's view of the Mahatma as fundamentally opposed to the type of rule by force enacted in the Emergency as well as the political appropriation and manipulation of religious schism. The Mahatma, Rushdie suggests here, is the furthest thing from Indira Gandhi, his namesake. Rather, Indira *is* related to Nehru, even if she seems to abandon his principles, complicating the rather simplistic view of Rushdie as a Nehru disciple who explicitly excludes Gandhi and regards his influence as dangerous.

This simplistic view of Rushdie as a Nehru disciple is curious considering his loud objections to the consideration of Nehru as a Gandhi disciple in Attenborough's

biopic *Gandhi*. This argument against the subjugation of Nehru to Gandhi complements and clarifies the broader argument in *Midnight's Children* about the possibility of historical referentiality through an ethics of inclusion. Rushdie insists that India's greatest conflict in defining itself is in the choice between "Nehru, the urban sophisticate who wanted to industrialize India [...] and the rural, handicraft-loving, sometimes medieval figure of Gandhi" (Rushdie, "Attenborough's Gandhi" 104). However, Rushdie does not choose this image of Nehru over this image of Gandhi, rather he rejects both images as reductive.

The venom unleashed in Rushdie's review of the Attenborough's film is in reaction to more than the film, but it is not directed against Gandhi himself or his teachings as Kortenaar suggests. Rather, Rushdie objects to the Western tendency to paint the East as a font *only* of spiritual wisdom as opposed to modern social and political knowledge and choices.⁴² This facet of Orientalist discourse places the East in a position of economic and political dependency, while placing all of its positive attributes into something of a fictional world of metaphysics and spirituality that is, at the very least, difficult to access and has little practical utility. By subjugating Nehru to Gandhi, Attenborough's film, argues Rushdie, participates in this type of Orientalist discourse, while the film's widespread critical and popular acclaim confirms the appeal and

influence of such discourse in the West.⁴³ While it is true that Rushdie clearly opposes the widespread application of Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence ("Attenborough's Gandhi" 105), what he is principally opposed to is the transformation of Gandhi into a Christ figure for which "the assassination is the crucifixion, which needs no explanation" ("Attenborough's Gandhi" 104). Rather, Rushdie insists that Gandhi was a human being with multiple and complex actions and motives whose killing "was a political, not a mystical act" (104).⁴⁴ Once again, this leads Rushdie to assert his crucial distinction between fiction or mythmaking and lies. "Attenborough's distortions mythologize, but they also lie" (104). Again, Rushdie does not object to mythologizing, the reading of stories as transhistorical and containing universal truths. He does, however, object to mythologizing at the expense of accurate referentiality.⁴⁵

Rushdie's final attack on Attenborough's film is not based only on the possibility, but also on the necessity, of accurate historical referentiality within a storytelling medium. He further argues that referentiality can be recovered in the *inclusion* of much of what Attenborough has excluded: the national debate between Nehruvian and Gandhian politics, the motivation behind Gandhi's assassination, Gandhi's secular *and* religious sides, and more rounded portrayals of other leaders of the independence struggle like Patel, Jinnah, and especially Bose whom Attenborough excludes altogether.

What Rushdie objects to here is an inaccurate portrayal of the past that allows only one side of a national debate to be seen, while simultaneously perpetuating Western stereotypes of the East.⁴⁶

In this regard, Rushdie is not merely a proponent of Nehruvian politics. Rather, he actually insists vigorously that only showing one side of this debate and obscuring other historical facts is the kind of lie that cannot be tolerated. Similarly, in his critique of contemporary film and television portrayals of the East, he notes how “Brits” are inevitably at the center of such narratives, while Indians are “bit-players in their own history.” His objection to this is the same, that is, that so much is left out, that a lie is perpetrated, “The form insists that *they* [the Brits] *are the ones whose stories matter*, and that is so much less than the whole truth that it must be called a falsehood” (“Outside the Whale” 90; emphasis original). Here again, Rushdie exhibits an ethics of inclusion, insisting that only a wide-ranging, all-inclusive representation can hope to contain a measure of truth. It is for this reason, that Rushdie writes and promotes a certain kind of novel.

There are novels which proceed on the basis of excluding most of the world, of plucking that one strand of the universe and writing about that. Or there are novels in which you try to include everything, what Henry James would call the “loose, baggy monsters” of fiction. And I suppose that my books would fall roughly into the loose-baggy-monster camp (“*Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*” 10; see Needham 153).

The bagginess of Rushdie's monsters derive, precisely, from an allegiance to history, and its multitude of events, *not* from a desire to deconstruct it.⁴⁷

While I would not argue that Rushdie does not prefer a Nehruvian secular nation to an allegiance to a government run under metaphysical or transcendental principles, whatever that government might look like, it is clear that Rushdie insists on accurate historical representation based on inclusion rather than its opposite. Indeed, Rushdie's policy of historical representation follows the policy of Saleem's family who bring him home from the hospital and refuse to discard any of the evidence of his birth. "Nothing was thrown away; baby and afterbirth were both retained" (*Midnight's Children* 144). In this case, while it is possible that mistakes are made, it is clear that the intent is to retain as much as possible, as Rushdie maintains must be done with the historical past. As *Midnight's Children* illustrates, this retention may take a narrative form, as long as that form is supplemented with the non-narrative episodes not easily integrated into it.

In regard to Gandhi, while it is true that Saleem marginalizes his presence when compared to more traditional accounts of the history of twentieth-century India, his consistent reference to the various errata he makes, particularly in regards to Gandhi, continues to place a significant focus on the Mahatma. In addition, by pointing overtly to his mistakes, Rushdie encourages readers to fill in the gaps of Saleem's linear, exclusive

narrative in order to access historical materiality. Also, although Rushdie focuses on twentieth-century political and social history, he also acknowledges the importance of a larger, more transcendental, history, when he refers to his existence within the Kali-Yuga, the Maha Yuga cycle, and the Day of Brahma (194). Likewise, and perhaps more importantly, while Kortenaar accuses Rushdie of excluding the “Gandhian and the transcendental,” he overlooks the form of Rushdie’s novel, which compensates for the exclusion of Gandhi with the use of literalized metaphor and the exploration of its power.⁴⁸ If the Mahatma, for some, presents an ideal of hope and promise for India through allusions to a world beyond our own and through the application of extreme, if occasionally unrealistic, political practice, the fictional world of *Midnight’s Children* serves much the same function.

Like religious discourse, Rushdie’s world of literalized metaphor provides a world of hope beyond our own, and which has a rhetorical force upon ours which is meant to steer our future moral, ethical, and political choices. Rushdie’s novel does not exclude the transcendental element of Indian history but rather includes it as an integral part of the form of the narration itself. In this sense, to accuse Rushdie of correlating Shiva and Gandhi is absurd, for it is Saleem whose narrative powers provide the transcendental hope that Shiva’s focus on the world of things does not allow. Still, while

Shiva is a materialist, he is also the font of future hope and the progenitor of another generation of midnight's children, and in this sense, he too partakes of the transcendental side of Indian history. Rushdie does not, then, exclude the Gandhian and the transcendental, but through the literalization of metaphor and the nonnarratable presence of the errata, insists on its inclusion alongside the secular ideals of Saleem and the materialist perspective of Shiva. Here, Rushdie makes an effort to "throw nothing away" as he accuses Attenborough of doing in his focus *only* on the transcendental in his depiction of India. Rushdie's point in the essay is that Gandhi too has a materialist, practical and political side, the effacement of which is a lie. He does not, however, in *Midnight's Children*, efface the transcendental side of Gandhi, but rather explores it through the mystical and fantastic storytelling form he has chosen.

In the previous two chapters of this study, we have seen that despite the deployment of narrative and the acknowledgment of some affection for it, both Graham Swift and Virginia Woolf propose that a true historical referentiality cannot be achieved through narrative, but must be accessed through non-narrative and/or anti-narrative means. On the other hand, many critics assert that Rushdie embraces narrative at the cost of historical and material referentiality. Here, however, it is clear that Rushdie is not only preoccupied with the difficulty of referencing the historical real, but he is also insistent

on the possibility and necessity of doing so. Unlike Swift and Woolf, however, in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie sees the referencing of the historical real as possible only through the complementary deployment of both narrative and non-narrative means, as well as through the use of closure and its attendant asserted final meaning and the strategic acknowledgment of loose ends that allow for that meaning to be adjusted.

Unlike Hayden White, Rushdie never suggests that the meaning inherent to the narrative form is an inherent lie, rather he suggests that metaphorical truth can be achieved through such "longing for form." At the same time, however, like White, Rushdie acknowledges that some events, personages, and ideas do not fit into a particular narrative or ideology.

While White argues that these excess elements that cannot be included in the narrative are inevitably *left out*, triggering a deviation from historical accuracy, Rushdie's novel suggests that we must, instead, find a way to *leave them in*, even if they threaten the coherence of the narrative they shadow. The price of exclusion is not only historical inaccuracy, but also intentional deception. In this, Rushdie encourages us as readers and prospective historians to not only "swallow the world," but to also present what escapes from the other end, because that too is the truth.

Finally, it is useful to return to Saleem's two sides and how they too represent two versions of historical accuracy. Again, both Swift and Woolf, in keeping with their

rejection of the vehicle of narrative for historical representation, reject the traditional subject matter of traditional historical discourse: the great actions of great bourgeois men, particularly in the field of battle and in national politics. While Rushdie too mocks this type of history, he also insists on its inclusion, not only in practice, but symbolically.

Like Omar Khayam in *Shame*, Saleem is not your typical heroic personage, whether it be in appearance or in his actions. He is, however, a bourgeois male whose progress is symbolic of his nation's as a whole, and he is a participant in all of the great actions and events of traditional narrative histories of India. What's more, even when Saleem is not explicitly involved in the important "actions" of history, Rushdie is sure to keep the reader up-to-date on important military and political events.⁴⁹ If Khayam is identified as a "marginal" man in *Shame*, Saleem is certainly a central figure in the history of this alternate India, so much so that he honestly believes that a series of bombs directed at Pakistan are meant exclusively for him and his family. Still, however, unlike much historical discourse, Rushdie emphasizes the contingent nature of what is important enough to receive historical representation. First, although Saleem continually contrives and constructs ways to configure himself as central to all historical action, there is much about his narrative that is quite ordinary and personal, as opposed to nationally grand and influential. In particular, the stories surrounding his school days, childhood romances,

and family squabbles seem far from the national drama in which Saleem claims a central role. More importantly, perhaps, is the contingency introduced by the revelation of the baby-switching by Mary Pereira. That is, while Saleem, the bourgeois child with a somewhat inflated sense of self-importance, receives the letter from Prime Minister Nehru telling him that his life is inextricably tied to his nation, it is at least an even proposition that the letter should be received by Shiva, who was exchanged with Saleem at the time of their mutual births. Likewise, it is Saleem who is afforded the opportunity to tell his tale, linking himself to history, as such, while Shiva, the inarticulate adoptive son of Wee Willie Winkie is kept silent.

The novel here invokes Gayatri Spivak's well-known question of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by pointing to the contingent and ideological nature of what is typically considered history. Because Saleem is lucky enough to be placed in a bourgeois household, he is able to place *himself* in a central position in India's history by simply narrating his tale. Likewise, Shiva's life, while perhaps intensely narratable in the sense specified by the likes of Miller and Brooks, remains unnarrated because he is unlucky enough to be taken home by a beggar, losing his capacity for self-representation because of his class and education. Shiva then only enters the narration of *Midnight's Children* when his life or mind intersects with Saleem's or when he participates in activities

common to traditional histories, as is the case in the latter portions of the novel when he becomes a military hero.⁵⁰

By pointing to the ways that what is traditionally selected as historical discourse is influenced by both random chance and bourgeois ideology, Rushdie makes an implicit argument that the traditional fare of narrative historiography is not sufficient in itself in representing the truth of the past. In particular, while Saleem's life *is* a reflection of traditional bourgeois historiography in its tracing of easily identifiable national histories like Wolpert's, it is also filled with irrelevant and occasionally inconsistent events that pinpoint Saleem's life as merely one among many. While Saleem chooses to focus on his heroic and representative status throughout most of the novel, he does, in the end, retreat from this stance and embraces his own status as a singular entity, rather than as a symbol for his nation. In this move, Rushdie suggests to his readers that the tracing of Shiva's life, or the life of any other character in the novel not afforded the centrality that Saleem is given, might also be a key to uncovering the truth of the past. In particular, both Padma and Parvati-the-Witch come to mind. In their status as women, lower class, and postcolonial subjects, they exemplify the voices that Spivak suggests have been not only obscured in historical discourse, but perhaps completely lost.

While neither Padma nor Parvati, like Shiva, ever get to tell their own stories in *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's final conclusion that the "small individual lives of men, are preferable to all this inflated macrocosmic activity," (518) suggests that all lives deserve greater attention, especially considering the random and ideologically biased manner in which certain types of lives are chosen to represent history, as such.⁵¹ Padma helps to voice this point of view when she accuses Saleem of being "too intellectual, too skeptical, too out of touch" (Brennan, "Cultural Politics" 123). Rushdie's social and class proximity to his protagonist also leave him as a target of this (self)-accusation. Although Saleem accuses Padma of "ignorance and superstition," he also acknowledges that she is a counterbalance to his own biased point-of-view (39). Likewise, it is significant that renewed hope in the novel comes in the form of members of the lower class, like Shiva, Durga and the umbrella-man. So, when Aruna Srisvastava notes two strands of Indian philosophy of history, the "ordinary" and the "extraordinary," (67) she refers to the coexistence of traditional history and its transcendental counterpart.⁵² In *Midnight's Children*, however, it also applies to the narratable and one of its opposites, the everyday or the quotidian. As Uma Parameswaran notes, "Rushdie [...] seems to spoof traditional histories for often being no more than biographies of kings and generals" (41). David Price concurs that often the "focus is on the common, everyday

experience of average people, and it is their experience [...] that comprises a more accurate history of India” (104).⁵³ While this is only partially true, it is an important part.

Unlike Swift and Woolf, however, Rushdie’s novel does not assert the historical irrelevance of traditional history and narrative in order to epistemologically value the non-narrative, the lack of progress and action, and the lower-class workers as opposed to their bourgeois counterparts. Rather, in the lives of both Saleem and Shiva, as well as in the novel as a whole, we have the suggestion that the macrocosmic, the metaphorical, and the narrative may provide us with ideals of progress, universalism, and meaning that are essential not only to our accessing of the historical past, but also to our movement towards the future. At the same time, Saleem has a quotidian, even non-narratable, side that is represented in the novel that, when coupled with the obvious exclusion of similar details in Shiva’s life, stands in for the individual lives not represented in traditional histories. However, this quotidian side of Saleem also represents a pole of the historical real that *must* be included if “both baby and afterbirth” are to be retained and access to history, both narrative and its excess, is to be achieved.

In this sense, Gandhi again becomes an important touchstone for Rushdie’s sense of how accurate historical representation can be achieved. Like Saleem, Gandhi takes part in virtually every “important” (traditionally considered) military, political and social

decision that occurs during his adult lifetime. At the same time, however, the Mahatma and his followers saw him not as a traditional politician, but as one of the people, particularly the historical underclass, the peasants whose daily existence (and starvation) was often ignored or shunted to the margins of centralized political decision-making and historical representation. That is, some elements of Gandhi's life and career can be seen, quite easily, as intensely narratable by traditional historical standards while others, were they not attached to the same personage, would normally be excluded from history.

While Rushdie asks that neither element of Gandhi's past be excluded from Attenborough's film, he likewise asserts that if historical representation is to present the truth of the past, it should exclude neither the narratable macrocosmic activity of politics and military might, nor the nonnarratable experiences of the subaltern. Rather, as with narrative and non-narrative, metaphor and materialism, each should dialectically supplement the other.

In *Midnight's Children*, then, Rushdie suggests that a combination of conventional and non-conventional representational techniques can help us represent the past accurately, something that it is essential to do. While Rushdie continually plays with the forms used to present history, he also continually insists that there is a real to be accessed and that the cost of obscuring that real is substantial. Whether it be the Amritsar

Massacre, the Indo-Pakistani conflict, or simply the lives of those unable to represent themselves (whether politically or aesthetically), Rushdie points to events and personages buried in history and in rhetoric that must be recovered if political and social progress in the present is to be gained. It is true that in an essay like “Outside the Whale,” Rushdie notes that “objectivity becomes a great dream, like perfection, an unattainable goal for which one must struggle in spite of the impossibility of success” (101). At the same time, however, he makes this statement in an effort to insist upon an ethics and a morality based upon the possibility of truth, not truth in the metaphysical sense, but in the sense of accurately identifying what has occurred. If a precise objectivity is impossible to achieve, this does not mean that one cannot come closer to identifying that truth. Rushdie asserts, “It seems to me imperative that literature enter such arguments, because what is being disputed is nothing less than what is the case, what is truth and what untruth” (100). Far from being an exercise in postmodern relativism, *Midnight’s Children* is an effort to enter into this argument, and to insist on what is the case, both within narrative and outside of it.⁵⁴

Notes

¹ This positioning of what is generally considered to be reality and truth as actually ideologically and discursively constructed is, of course, a common contention of what I have been calling postmodernist (or constructivist) historiography, as well as postmodernism in general. Like many proponents of this view of historical discourse, Srisvastava points to how all history in *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* is constructed

from the perspective of a particular ideology, deceptively transforming one particular point-of-view into purportedly transparent representation. According to Srisvastava, Rushdie's novel exposes history, which is always constructed, *as* construction, revealing its ideological commitments and its complicity with such ideology. While I do not necessarily disagree with this assessment, I endeavor in this chapter to also show how Rushdie suggests that while historical discourse is colored by ideology and by construction of other sorts (linguistic, for instance), it is also necessary to insist upon its capacity to represent the truth of the past and to preserve events that might otherwise be lost. Srisvastava also has some compelling things to say about how the novel attempts to confront and present "Truth" (historical or otherwise), some of which I will be contending with over the course of the chapter. For some additional readings of Rushdie as a postmodernist deconstructor of traditional history *par excellence*, see David Birch "Postmodernist Chutneys," Sabrina Hassumani's *Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Major Works*, Linda Hutcheon *The Politics of Postmodernism* (63-76), Michael Reder, "Rewriting History and Identity," M. Keith Booker "Beauty and the Beast," Ron Shepherd "*Midnight's Children* as Fantasy," and David W. Price, "Salman Rushdie's Use and Abuse of History in *Midnight's Children*." In typical language assessing Rushdie as postmodernist, Hassumani says of *Midnight's Children*, that it illustrates the proposition that "there are no absolute versions of history and, in fact, all the versions are constructs" (27). Likewise, Price correlates Rushdie's philosophy of history with that of Nietzsche in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," reading the novel as a critique of "monumental" and "antiquarian" models of history. Says Price, "Saleem presents history as a performance of narration, as opposed to a representation of events that took place in the past" (93). Jean Kane echoes this sentiment despite arriving at it from a less conventional direction, "Rushdie uses recollection as a corrective to the distortions of imperial and neocolonial history, but this antidote meets the limit in the romance of India as the repository of narrative" (116). Here, suggests Kane, Rushdie's politics and history fail to reach their potential precisely because of their reliance on romance as a genre and, more importantly, narrative as a form. Her comments summarize postmodernist historiography in general, and many readings of Rushdie, quite nicely. Over the course of this essay, I suggest that Rushdie rather insists that narrative performance and representation of past events are not mutually exclusive.

For interesting counter-viewpoints to Rushdie as a postmodernist, interested in history as discourse, and only as discourse, see Pierre François, Bishnupriya Ghosh, Patricia Merivale and Timothy Brennan. In Brennan's "The Cultural Politics of Rushdie Criticism," he idiosyncratically asserts, rather offhandedly, that Rushdie stridently resists the postmodern focus on discourse, calling him an "unapologetic debunker of discursive theory" (109) and "resolutely nonpostmodern" (115). This claim seems to be based both on Rushdie's nonfiction essays and interviews (see Chauhan 68), as well as on his rather evident political and social commitments. These commitments do not, of course, preclude an affiliation or sympathy with discourse theory, as I discuss over the course of this study. Ghosh also interestingly asserts the belief that Rushdie's vision "is a modernist one, tied to a clear world-text divide," (147) before detailing ways in which Rushdie is both modern *and* postmodern. Merivale, in her explicit argument that Rushdie is influenced by Gunter Grass, also notes that "for Grass and Rushdie, the historical has a clear ontological status, but it may be perceived, described, and interpreted in such a way

as to show the marvelously grotesque inherent in the actual” (335). In this, like Ghosh, she makes an inherent claim for Rushdie’s modernism, rather than postmodernism. François focuses on *The Satanic Verses*, insisting on its philosophical materialism, as opposed to idealism.

² I cite Wolpert here not as a particularly egregious example of “traditional historiography” that participates in ideological deception, but because several critics of *Midnight’s Children* have identified his text as either a source text for the novel, or as a representative example of the kind of historical account that Rushdie parodies. See Lipscomb for the most complete version of the former and Kortenaar’s “*Midnight’s Children* and the Allegory of History” for the latter. Certainly Wolpert’s book is an example of traditional historiography but, as there are several histories of India that are similarly constructed, it would be unfair to single Wolpert out as the only example. Another Rushdie critic who cites Wolpert in particular is Price,

³ See Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout,” Appiah, Daring and Huggan for some examples.

⁴ Michael Gorra, who also comments on the simultaneous form and fragmentation of the novel, makes a partial list of the divergent narratives that serve as a useful reminder to how much of the novel is *not* attached to a unitary account of the fate of the midnight’s children: “odes to chutney; Tai the Kashmiri boatman, who for years refused to wash, the pyromania of Saleem’s sister, the Brass Monkey; a father who offers to have his daughter’s teeth pulled and replaced with gold as a dowry, the atrocities of the Bangladesh war; the ghostwomen of the Sundarbans; mango-kissing in the Indian film industry; smuggling in the Rann of Kutch; Bombay billiards, snakecharmers, and bicycles” (190). For other readings of the dialectics of form and fragmentation in the novel, see Rege, Brigg and Wilson.

⁵ Saleem asserts the singularity of the body, if not of the subject, when he writes, “a human being, inside himself, is anything but a whole, anything but homogeneous; all kinds of everything are jumbled up inside him and he is one person one minute and another the next. [...] The body, on the other hand, is homogeneous as anything. Indivisible, a one-piece suit, a sacred temple, if you will” (230-31). Jean Kane calls this claim of Saleem’s “disingenuous” focusing, as she does, upon how the body is shown to be fragmentary and open to the outside world, as opposed to inviolably separate. Like Kane, Lorna Milne points particularly to the trope of the nose, as that place in the novel where the world enters the body and vice versa (Kane 97-98; Milne 31; *Midnight’s Children* 19). While this point can hardly be argued, I believe there is more to Saleem’s claim than disingenuousness. Rather, in typically dialectic fashion, Rushdie points to how the body is *both* singular and unitary, capable of containing multitudes within one form, while also being fragmentary and interpenetrative. That is, when Saleem loses the tip of his finger and claims his belief in the unity of the body has been “undone,” this is only partially true, while there is also some truth to his earlier statement.

⁶ This is a continuation of the trope of Saleem as metaphor for India, as he breaks up into as many pieces as there are people in India at the time of the novel’s writing.

⁷ In fact, Rushdie cites one of the key lines of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* discussed in the introduction of this study to explain the role of memory in *Midnight's Children* ("Imaginary Homelands" 14).

⁸ See Rushdie's essay, "'Errata': Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*,'" for a more complete listing of errors, many of which, with my outsider's knowledge of Indian history, I would undoubtedly have missed. Among these are the elimination of the festival of Mumbadevi from the calendar of the novel and the moving the debut of Lata Mangeshkar, on whose life Jamila Singer is based, on All-India radio chronologically forward to 1946.

⁹ Timothy Brennan also briefly notes this distinction as the central difference between *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, noting that in *Shame* "the problem is not idealizing the past [as it is in the former novel] but simply 'rewriting history' — not myth as 'false consciousness' but myth as the government lie one knows to be a lie but cannot contradict for fear of reprisal" (*Salman Rushdie and the Third World* 123). Here Brennan sees both "myths" and "lies" in this context as fundamental deviations from the real that mislead and obstruct access to political and ethical initiative. He does, however, make distinctions between them. My argument in this chapter is constructed around these distinctions as they operate within *Midnight's Children* and how they impact the question of referentiality.

¹⁰ These two "characters" are clearly alternate-world analogs for General Zia ul-Huq and Zulfikar ali-Bhutto and are universally acknowledged by both critics and casual readers as such.

¹¹ Rushdie has, of course, commented on Orwell directly himself in "Outside the Whale," and elsewhere has noted "there has never been a time when the truth has been so manipulated because the weapons of manipulation are now so sophisticated" (Reder, *Conversations* 70). In this, Rushdie seems to be asserting that "truth" itself exists prior to manipulation and that its manipulation is to be avoided if possible. Likewise, he writes in "Outside the Whale" that "new and better maps of reality" ("Outside the Whale" 100) can be created, affirming the existence of a reality that precedes its mapping. None of this seems to coincide with the view of Rushdie as postmodernist *par excellence* that I am discussing here, and which I ultimately reject.

¹² As Stanley Wolpert writes, "Fear motivated millions of Indians to greater efficiency . Police were free to do as they liked. [...] A chill climate of silent terror gripped many Indian homes, for no one knew who might be listening, recording, reporting 'treasonous remarks'" (qtd. in Kuchta 213-14). Later editions of Wolpert, however, tone down the implicit critique of the Emergency (see Wolpert 397-404). Todd M. Kuchta notes that the Emergency also spawned many forced sterilizations and the destruction of property: "Between April and September of 1976, 3.7 million sterilizations were performed at Sanjay's behest, and in April he ordered the demolition of the squatter settlements near the historic Turkman Gate in New Delhi, where six people were killed by police and tens of thousands lost their homes" (213). This is the "black side" of the

Emergency which Rushdie insists on as a hidden truth. For a more complete discussion of this side of the Emergency and its intersections with *Midnight's Children*, see Kuchta (211-14).

¹³ See Rushdie's essay, "Attenborough's Gandhi," for what he perceives to be the false history perpetuated in an effort to distance Britain as a whole from the horror of the Amritsar Massacre. In this essay, he endeavors to remind his readers of the "truth" of the aftermath of the massacre:

Take the Amritsar Massacre. This is perhaps the most powerful sequence in the film [*Gandhi*]. Both the massacre and the subsequent court-martial at which outraged Englishmen question the unrepentant Dyer with barely suppressed horror, are staged accurately and with passion. But what these two scenes mean is that Dyer's actions at Jallianwala Bagh were those of a cruel over-zealous individual, and that they were immediately condemned by Anglo-India. And that is a complete falsehood.

The British in Punjab in 1919 were panicky. They feared a second Indian Mutiny. They had nightmares about rape. The court-martial may have condemned Dyer, but the colonists did not. He had taught the wogs a lesson; he was a hero. And when he returned to England, he was given a hero's welcome. An appeal fund launched on his behalf made him a rich man. Tagore, disgusted by the British reaction to the massacre, returned his knighthood. In the case of Amritsar, artistic selection has altered the meaning of the event. It is an unforgivable distortion. ("Attenborough's Gandhi" 103)

The key in this passage to my argument is Rushdie's clear claim that, when it comes to history, there is such a thing as truth, just as there is such a thing as falsehood. In particular, the practice of selection and erasure removes pieces of the story that are essential to a truer referentiality, and therefore a truer meaning. This contributes to Rushdie's ethic and aesthetic of inclusion, discussed more thoroughly later in the chapter.

¹⁴ For a useful overview of this type of criticism, as well as a commentary on the importance of nationalism, whether fictional or real, for third-world resistance to imperialism (and particularly for Rushdie), see the first chapter of Timothy Brennan's *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*. Brennan also points to the many critics whose work predates and supplements the theorists I highlight here.

¹⁵ Bhabha's articulation of the nation as narration divides the concept into two parts, the pedagogical and the performative. The pedagogical is composed of things learned and passed down through the ages, creating "tradition," as such. The performative is that part of a nation's history that is created anew, through performance, in each present moment. This latter allows for Bhabha's optimistic sense of the nation and narration itself as "emergent," capable of participating in the formation of cultural difference, hybrid subjectivities, and double meanings that he proposes as essential for the present, particularly in the postcolonial arena. Bhabha appropriates Rushdie's work explicitly, pointing to its own engagement with hybridity and double meanings, but in

doing so he positions Rushdie within the poststructural/postmodern discourse that Bhabha privileges and underplays Rushdie's allegiance to the material referentiality to the historical past that I point to here. Chatterjee (like Chakrabarty) proposes that the very idea of the "nation" is linked with such Western concepts as "progress" and "rationalism," which led India to follow the path of Western industrialism: a bad choice according to Chatterjee. Here Chatterjee criticizes the East, and India in particular, for accepting the story of the nation as established by the colonizing West, noting (and recounting) the possibility of lost opportunities in the discursive construction of the nation. Rushdie, by contrast, advocates many of the West's discursive values, particularly those of the Enlightenment (see esp. *Shame* 251), if not the practice that has gone with them. Chatterjee points to the problems and pitfalls of applying Enlightenment rationalism to the construction of the Indian nation, while Rushdie points towards the universal values of the Enlightenment as a model, while critiquing the West's discursive construction of the East. In this sense, Chatterjee disagrees with Rushdie ideologically, if not with his sense of the nation as narration.

¹⁶ Although it would undoubtedly be a mistake to attribute Saleem's views to Rushdie in their totality, quite often Rushdie seems to use Saleem as a mouthpiece for opinions expressed elsewhere. Here, for instance, Saleem's claims about the fantasy that is India is later advocated and expanded upon by Rushdie: "I suppose what he [Saleem]—or I, through him—was saying was that there never had been a political entity called India in 1947. The thing that became independent had never previously existed, except that there had been an area, a zone called India. So it struck me that was coming into being, this idea of a nation-state, was an invention. It was an invention of the nationalist movement. And a very successful invention. One could argue that nation-states are that kind of collective fantasies" (qtd. in Reder, "Rewriting History and Identity" 246, n. 24). In fact, this is precisely the argument made by Bhabha, Anderson, Hobsbawm, Chatterjee, and many others. This particular claim originally appeared in Rushdie's essay, "A Fantasy Called India" (36) in *India Today International* in 1997.

¹⁷ It is well known that the term "Pakistan," an acronym, was originally thought up in England by a group of Muslim intellectuals. P for the Punjabis, A for the Afghans, K for the Kashmiris, S for the Sind and the "tan", they say for Baluchistan. [...] So it was a word born in exile which then went East, was borne-across or translated, and imposed itself on history; a returning migrant, setting down on partitioned land, forming a palimpsest on the past. A palimpsest obscures what lies beneath. To build Pakistan it was necessary to cover up Indian history, to deny that Indian centuries lay beneath the surface of Pakistani Standard Time. The past was rewritten; there was nothing else to be done" (*Shame* 87). Interestingly, Aruna Srisvastava takes this passage as pointing to important differences between India and Pakistan, although both nations require a "rewriting" of the past in order to establish themselves as nations. Perhaps it is the obscuring of "what lies beneath" that is considered to be different in Pakistan, but the imposition of a new history upon an old is also seen, over the course of *Midnight's Children*, in India. Rushdie's assessment seems to be that both nations are imagined, but Pakistan "insufficiently" so ("In God We Trust" 387).

¹⁸ This cry for literal interpretation occurs several times throughout the novel, in particular when Saleem describes how his body begins to crack, quoted above (37). Although the degree to which the audience is supposed to take Saleem literally is questioned at various points, in particular, when the doctors can find nothing wrong with him, the fictional world seems to dictate that although the cracking and shattering of Saleem is merely a metaphor, it is a metaphor that literally comes true at the close of the novel, while commenting on how the real world India also seems to be falling apart, or shattering.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Guha, *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, particularly the introduction.

²⁰ Interestingly, in this case Rushdie explicitly ties lies and fictions together, noting “The beginning of fiction is fable-telling lies” (Chauhan 63). Nevertheless, perhaps there is a difference between something that starts with a lie, yet produces truth, and an isolated lie that produces nothing.

²¹ For one of Rushdie’s sustained attacks on Hindu communalism and the effacement of Muslim efforts at cooperation and support of a unified India, see “The Riddle of Midnight,” first published in 1987 and reprinted in *Imaginary Homelands* (26-33). See also the Rushdie’s opening comments in a 1996 interview with Alvaro Vargas Llosa (reprinted in Chauhan 209-12), in which he notes the ever-increasing communalism in India and how his then most recent novel, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, deals with the end of the secular India in which he grew up.

²² As usual, there is some ambiguity to Rushdie’s assertions of a limit to the changeling side of human nature. The narrator of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (Moraes Zogoiby himself), as is typical of Rushdiean narrators, asserts the value of precisely those principles that Uma negatively embodies in his commentary against the Hindu cult of Ram. “The true ‘rule of Ram’ should [...] surely be premised on the mutating, inconstant, shape-shifting, realities of human nature—and not only human nature, but divine as well. This thing being advocated in the great god’s name flew in the face of his essence as well as ours” (351). Rushdie criticizes the movement by right-wing Hindu elements to transform the multitudinous polytheism of Hinduism into a form of monotheism and praises forms of hybridity and multiplicity. Likewise, if Uma is the negative example of protean art and subjectivity, Aurora is her positive counterbalance, and she comes to see hybridity as an ideal in itself. Nevertheless, while Rushdie’s aversion to singular and monolithic personality and community is well commented upon critically, his simultaneous aversion to the infinite delights of proteanism are not as widely acknowledged as they should be. Even in reference to Ram, Rushdie here insists on the truth of the multivalent, hybrid Ram at the expense of the Ram invented by the novel’s Mainduck Fielding and his followers in Mumbai’s Axis (or Bal Thackeray and the Shiv Sena Party in the real world). So, Bishnupriya Ghosh, for instance, draws attention to how the Mainduck version of Ram is an “invented essentialism, a claim to origins that Indian history makes impossible” (138). At the same time, however, the multivalent alternative Moraes presents is not meant to be seen as merely a different invention, but

instead as closer to the truth of religious, national, and cultural history: indeed, closer to the “essence” of Ram himself.

²³ Rushdie’s interest in creating a “fictional world” that encompasses several of his novels seems to have increased over the course of his career. For instance, while *Midnight’s Children* uses the actual names of many, if not all, historical personages (like Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay, as well as several Pakistani political leaders), *Shame* represents Pakistan’s politicians almost exclusively with pseudonyms. In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, however, Rushdie clearly returns to the world of the former novel, including Aadam Sinai, Saleem’s son, as a character of some small import, as the ultra-Westernized businessman/stepson of Abraham Zogoiby. Mary and Alice Pereira are also mentioned in passing, as are the Sabarmati’s and Dom Minto, the private investigator who uncovered Lila Sabarmati’s affair. For further correspondences between the two books, see Moss (124-25). Likewise, Zeeny Vakil, the spokeswoman for cross-cultural translations in *The Satanic Verses*, makes several appearances in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* in her role as an art critic, bringing that former novel clearly into the fold of those sharing this fictional world. The strategy of literalizing metaphor is not as pervasive in later novels like *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, but is deployed at times and is clearly evident in *The Satanic Verses*, in which Saladin Chamcha takes on the appearance of a devil, precisely because this is the metaphor commonly conferred upon the subcontinental immigrants into London, where the novel takes place. In short, most of Rushdie’s major novels share a world, both in its deviations from the real laws of physics and in the personages that people it. Indeed, in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, several key historical events are self-consciously different from those in the real world: John F. Kennedy lives through the assassination attempt, Watergate is a novel, rather than an actual event, etc. It is, I believe, worthwhile to investigate the reasons why such a shared world is necessary, and the rhetorical effect it has, whether intended or not. Rushdie himself comments on Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s fictional world of Macondo and stresses that it should not be seen as “an invented self-referential closed system” (“Gabriel García Márquez” 301-02). He also points out the Garcia Marquez is not writing about a fantasy or science fiction world but “about the one we inhabit” (128). The same can be said about Rushdie’s work; he writes about another India in order to comment up his own.

²⁴ Of course, there is in this the problematic relationship between the real author, the implied author, and the narrator. Although the three seem coterminous here, Rushdie does note elsewhere that these autobiographical passages, although clearly meant to refer to him directly, are at times fictionalized to a degree. “In *Shame* there’s no narrator. It’s not narrated, except by me. There is an ‘I’ figure in it which is me and occasionally says things. And even that isn’t quite me because novelists, being sneaky people, will fictionalize even the bit that looks like autobiography” (Chauhan 29-30). Rushdie’s typical simultaneous effort to insure real world reference, while pointing to its fictionality is clear in this case.

²⁵ An interpretation of postmodernism like Brian McHale’s correlates the two approaches, poststructuralism and fictional worlds theory, by noting how the deployment of alternative fictional worlds, or even of different levels of framing diegeses, puts

ontology itself into question, questioning not only reference, but also existence itself. That is, according to McHale's logic, the skepticism towards historicity and representation present in a poststructural approach to a text like *Midnight's Children* is largely spawned by the novel's deployment of a fictional world in its capacity to displace our faith in the reality of our own world. M. Keith Booker makes a similar claim, explicitly applying the idea to Rushdie's work, when he says that "the theme of two contradictory realities occupying the same space is a favorite one in Rushdie's fiction" and that "if two incompatible and contradictory alternative realities can occupy the same space, then clearly the very notions of 'identity' and 'reality' are called into question" ("Beauty and the Beast" 990). For McHale, this is, at least partially, the function of postmodernist fiction. My argument here is somewhat antithetical, as, like Walsh, I suggest that the use of the fictional world functions as a rhetorical commentary on our own, not as an intrinsic alert to our world's ontological fragility. Rushdie himself has likewise commented upon the limited utility of both of these types of readings. In a conversation with Gunter Grass, Rushdie notes, "There are two bodies of thought at the moment which would hold that politics is none of our business as writers. There is [...] an attitude towards writing which says that it is somehow separate from these public issues, and ought to be separated from them. And, on the other hand, you have the whole apparatus of post-modernist critique, which also, for very different reasons, seek to separate the text from the world. So you have both a radical and conservative discourse suggesting that writers should not meddle in public affairs" (qtd. in Reder, *Conversations* 74). I believe Rushdie's admitted lack of first-hand experience with postmodern and poststructuralist discourse leads him to a reductive reading of this type of thought. In particular his notion of postmodernism stipulating a text/world separation, rather than the construction of the world *as* text, betrays a lack of conversance with poststructuralist theory. He does, however, point to some of the limitations of that discourse that I discuss here and throughout this study.

²⁶ Although Riffaterre's argument is useful to me here, I do disagree with his central claim, which I read as postmodernist at its most radically relativistic. In his book, Riffaterre argues that, in fact, "truth" in fiction is defined completely by the coherence of its inner system, along with how we read the external world like a fiction, with a similarly coherent system or metalanguage. In this sense, the truth of a work has no relation to its reference to the real world: "Metalanguage remains the same whether it rests on actual referentiality or is an image of referentiality. There is no formal difference between a metalinguistic reading of a text about accepted facts and that of a text whose contents are a figment of the author's imagination (Riffaterre xv). My point about history as a pretransformation text is precisely the opposite. Rushdie, indeed, asks his readers to contribute to and acknowledge the world outside the text and his novels attempt both to represent it and comment upon it. Riffaterre also argues that the transformation of truth into a metalinguistic question allows for the discussion of "general truths" or truths of the more metaphorical and universal variety. In this, his thought reflects my above discussion of Rushdie's insistence on truth in metaphor. Rushdie's simultaneous allegiance to historical referentiality is, however, abandoned by Riffaterre.

²⁷ The structure of the novel does not completely adhere to these rules, of course. There are undoubtedly metaphors employed that are not experienced literally in the world

of the novel. However, theoretically speaking, the degree to which literalized metaphor is pervasively embedded in the novel serves the rhetorical purposes I describe. Rushdie, however, is not above making fun of his own strategy, in particular in the episode in which Mary Pereira is disturbed and frightened by Nehru's letter to the family, noting that he and the nation will be "keeping an eye" on Saleem. Mary takes this metaphor literally and is fearful that Saleem and his family will be constantly watched. Although this appears to be a moment for the reader to laugh at Mary's naïvete, in the world of the novel, it is difficult to blame her for taking this figure of speech for a literal possibility. Finally, I do not wish to suggest here that Rushdie invents this mode of storytelling. Its close relationship to allegory, a venerable literary genre, has been noted elsewhere (see Kuchta, Kortenaar, "Allegory of History" and Reder, "Rewriting History") as has the similarity of Rushdie's narrative strategy to precursors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Günter Grass.

²⁸ For an alternative, and indeed diametrically opposed, interpretation of this passage, see M. Keith Booker's "Beauty and the Beast" (243). Booker claims that Rushdie's admitting of his lie invokes the (in)famous "liar's paradox," although my understanding of this paradox involves someone who claims to *always* lie (not who claims to lie just once as is the case here), thus invalidating his claim to be a liar. If that claim is invalidated then he could be telling the truth about being a liar, etc. In any case, Booker asserts that the reader, after reading this passage, will find it impossible to separate the true from the false, and because Saleem's narration is tied so closely to history, historical discourse itself is likewise put into doubt. While there is undoubtedly some truth to this interpretation, I believe it is also important to see how Saleem does indeed have an aversion to outright untruths, and that historical inaccuracies in the novel are either unintentional "mistakes" and flagged as such, or metaphorical interpretations which does not necessarily invalidate their truth claims.

²⁹ Lieutenant Colonel K. M. Nanavati shot his wife's lover on April 27, 1959 and then surrendered himself to the police. Several appeals were denied and the case was something of a newspaper and tabloid sensation. The Sabarmati affair is clearly (and has been acknowledged to be) based on the story of the Nanavatis.

³⁰ His role in the shooting of Catrack is certainly greater than the one he plays in the death of classmate Jimmy Kapadia, whose death he dreamed on the night previous to its occurrence (297).

³¹ While Saleem continually asserts how his narrative is different from the kind Padma expects, citing linearity in particular, my own reading of the novel is that it is more linear that Saleem cares to admit. Although there are elements of non-linearity, the main thrust of the narrative *is* unrelentingly linear, starting many years before the Indian Independence and Saleem's birth, and proceeding through these formative events forward through the life of the nation and the protagonist. In this way, Saleem does slowly fulfill the expectations of Padma's "what-happened-nextism" (41). Uma Parameswaran cites as elements of non-linearity, Rushdie's employment of both Public Announcements (updates on contemporary events that parallel the novel's story) and "periodic previews of events to come," (38) wherein Saleem interjects brief versions of stories as yet untold

in their entirety, both whetting his readers' appetite and providing a sense of foreshadowing. Another element of non-linearity is the multitude of digressions, or tales that do not seem to fit comfortably within the central broader narrative (see note 4). These latter, however, are presented within the linear structure of the novel as a whole, perhaps not fitting into a rigid definition of plot, but certainly part of a chronological succession. As I continue to explore throughout this chapter, Rushdie combines elements of linear and non-linear storytelling, just as he advocates for a combination of narrative and non-narrative strategies of historical representation. David Carroll writes, "The novel must transcend its own language, its own linearity, and constitute a space in which linearity is simply an element" (145; see also Srisvastava 75). While linearity is certainly an element in *Midnight's Children*, it is an element often used to explore its own limitations, as the limitations of narrative in general are explored. Timothy Brennan makes a compelling argument about Rushdie's strategy of deploying the Koran (a non-linear, relatively atemporal text) as a model for *Shame* and thus giving it something of a non-linear (and non-narrative style) (*Salman Rushdie and the Third World* 129-ff.). This novel too, however, includes a linear development of recent Pakistani history

³² For the best account of the relationship between *Midnight's Children* and the *Arabian Nights*, see Batty.

³³ This interesting division of Saleem's sister and his affections for her can perhaps be explained in the mode Jean Kane suggests. If Jamila represents Pakistan as that part of India that has been lost, it makes sense that Saleem (India) has greater affection for her when she is part of him in his role as the nation, but the desire for repossession transforms affection into lust. "Jamila, as Pakistan, becomes the missing and inaccessible part that Saleem, as India, incestuously desires to repossess" (Kane 111).

³⁴ This is, in fact, the position taken by many critics. Neil ten Kortenaar exemplifies this point of view when he argues, "the reader is free to prefer Shiva to Saleem as the mirror of India. But the concern for order is valuable in and of itself, and we readers cannot but opt for order [Saleem] over chaos [Shiva]. There is no absolute reason to choose Saleem, but no reader will choose Shiva. The historian offers order and narrative. His enemy is the one who seeks only chaos" ("Allegory of History" 57). This point of view is, of course, predicated upon the notion that Saleem represents order and narrative, while Shiva represents anti-narrative and chaos. I argue throughout the rest of this chapter, that, in fact, both Saleem and Shiva represent both narrative and its non-narratable opposite and that Rushdie wishes us to choose a combination of these elements in order to more accurately access historical reality and to fight for the future of the real world India. While Saleem is, of course, the "hero" of the book, it is not quite correct to assign Shiva the role of villain.

³⁵ In this essay, Rushdie critiques Indira's efforts to mythologize the Emergency. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to note that it is not the process of mythologizing that Rushdie solely objects to, but the simultaneous production of lies.

³⁶ Again, there is some ambiguity in this case, as there are some remnants of magic and metaphor that remain behind. However, symbolically, this is the moment that the novel's world can begin to be seen as not only parallel to, but also touching, our own.

³⁷ Included in this episode is yet another of Saleem's errata, as it is Jajit Singh Aurora who accepts Niazi's surrender, not General Sam Maneksaw, after all. My reading of the scene is relatively unaffected by this error, however.

³⁸ It is worth noting that the optimism that could be associated with the assignment of these attributes to Aadam Sinai is undercut somewhat by his reappearance as the ultimate representation of capitalism itself and its influence upon the east in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Adam, the spelling of his name Westernized, departs from the novel into prison, convicted on a variety of counts including "corruption, drug-smuggling, arms dealing, money laundering, and procuring" (Moss 126; *Moor's Last Sigh* 370). As Laura Moss notes, "In the figure of Adam, Saleem's metaphorical hope for the future of India is truncated" (126). Indeed, some Marxist critics have interpreted Rushdie's anti-Indira focus in *Midnight's Children* as an implicit complicity with the capitalist West. The withering critique of capitalism and its inherent bedfellow, organized crime, in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, at the very least, complicates this criticism.

³⁹ One of the few critics who makes a brief attempt at an interpretation of this passage is Keith Wilson in "*Midnight's Children* and Reader Responsibility." Wilson notes the fact that the "seven inch" length of the turd matches the length of the hole cut in the perforated sheet that allows Dr. Aziz to see his future wife. While Wilson calls this correspondence "suggestive," he is a bit unclear as to what it suggests. Perhaps both passages suggest a limited perspectivism as Saleem has, at this point, given up his claims to being a representative of India as a whole. Nevertheless, Wilson does not explore the lure of the narratable that the umbrella-man's turd evokes.

⁴⁰ The pairing of the Widow (or the goddess Kali) and Parvati-the-Witch (or the goddess Parvati) establishes a similar parallel, as they too represent both creation and destruction when paired together.

⁴¹ For an interesting, extended discussion of this passage, see Price "Salman Rushdie's Use and Abuse of History." Price notes how the incessant reminder that Indira Gandhi is *not* related to the Mahatma nevertheless serves to link them together not only in *Midnight's Children* but in historical discourse in general. Price's broader point, that Rushdie's novel serves to deconstruct the type of "monumentalist" history that attempts to deify contemporary politicians like Indira, may be undercut somewhat by Rushdie's repetition of the (non)relationship of the two Gandhis. That is, Rushdie makes Indira into something more than a mere individual, not only by asserting the non-relationship between Indira and the Mahatma, but also in the ominous construction of her as the more than human Widow. For Rushdie's own discussion of Indira's opportunistic deployment of her last name, see "Dynasty" (50).

⁴² Again, this objection of Rushdie's takes greater prominence in some of his later books. In particular, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* satirizes the tendency of 1960's rock stars to search for spiritual enlightenment in India.

⁴³ Rushdie lingers on the film's reception of the 1983 Academy Award, noting "If this is the Best Film of 1983, God help the film industry" ("Attenborough's Gandhi" 105).

⁴⁴ Rushdie makes a similar case for his portrayal of the prophet Mohammed in *The Satanic Verses* in several interviews (see Chauhan).

⁴⁵ Frank Kermode's distinction between myth and fiction is useful in this case. Kermode suggests that fiction is always acknowledged as untrue in the conventional sense, while myth, although often more outlandish, is often seen as containing elements of truth or reality that are transhistorical: true in every era or location. Rushdie never repudiates the possibility of the latter, but insists that it need not come at the expense of historical referentiality. That is accurate referential history and myth can themselves coexist (as they do in *Midnight's Children*), despite Kermode's claims that histories are fiction and History (as a concept; totalizing History) is itself a myth. Hassumani also discusses Roland Barthes's definition of myth and its relationship to *Midnight's Children* (32-33).

⁴⁶ For a similar account of the film, including Rushdie's distaste for the "falsification of history," see the 1983 interview with Salil Tripathi, reprinted in Reder, *Conversations* (28-29).

⁴⁷ For a reading of Rushdie in some ways congenial to my own, but focusing on gender issues in *Shame*, see Anurandha Dingwaney Needham's "The Politics of Post-Colonial Identity in Rushdie." In particular, Needham points to Rushdie's efforts at inclusive storytelling in an effort to subvert or oppose false versions of the past. Likewise, Rushdie himself has reiterated his affection for the "baggy monsters" of fiction in several other interviews (e.g. Chauhan 234). It is, perhaps, inevitable to suggest that it is actually impossible to include everything, and that such a term as "all-inclusive" cannot help but be a misnomer. This does not, however, change the fact that Rushdie both insists upon inclusive historical representation and presents just that, particularly in *Midnight's Children*, while self-consciously pointing to areas he may have left out so that the reader can fill in the gaps themselves.

⁴⁸ This is not to say that Kortenaar ignores the form of literalized metaphor. Rather, he discusses it prominently. He does not, however, clearly see the parallels between the form of Rushdie's novel and the function of Gandhi within Indian historical discourse.

⁴⁹ That is, even when Saleem is elsewhere or otherwise occupied, he is sure to keep the readers (and Padma) up to date on the movements of conventional history

(military conflicts, regime changes, elections) through expository passages of varying lengths.

⁵⁰ In this regard, Aamir Mufti's brief reading of the novel (53-54) has much in common with my own more expansive treatment, particularly in Mufti's focus on Shiva's opposition to the third principle, and the novel's specification of the limits to bourgeois historiography. However, Mufti does not tease out all of the ramifications of this reading, particularly in regards to the novel's historiographic materialism, principally because his focus is not *Midnight's Children*, but *The Satanic Verses*.

⁵¹ In this case, it is worthwhile to note that while Saleem refers specifically to men, his fictional practice indicates not only an avowed feminism, but also a correlation between the position of the postcolonial subject and the position of women in general. In this, my choice of Parvati-the-Witch as an exemplar of the untold stories that should be included in historical accounts makes a certain amount of sense. Still, however, Rushdie's deployment of gender politics and his general construction of women over the course of his oeuvre are contradictory and problematic. For an excellent overview of Rushdie's developing treatment of women and of feminism, see Ambreen Hai's "Marching in from the Peripheries." Hai focuses largely on *Shame* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the two novels that most self-reflexively address the troubled relationship between India, its women, and Western feminism. She does, however, also discuss the remainder of Rushdie's major novels. See also Ahmad, Gremal, and Mann on these issues.

⁵² The conjunction of the ordinary and the extraordinary in Rushdie's work takes on multiple incarnations. While here I have been talking about the ordinary events and passage of everyday experience as opposed to the extraordinary and narratable grand events of traditional historical representation, Aruna Srisvastava discusses ordinary historical time and the extraordinary transcendental time specified by Gandhi. Likewise, much discussion of magical realism devotes itself to the discussion of extraordinary events and circumstances told in an ordinary or straightforward manner, as in the case of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Saleem himself provides a description of this style when he writes, "Matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday — these techniques, which are also attitudes of mind, I have lifted — or perhaps absorbed — from the most formidable of the midnight's children" (214). At times, Rushdie partakes in this type of combination of the ordinary and the extraordinary but his narrator also, at times, expresses amazement at the metaphorical manifesting itself literally, as is the case when Saleem gains his powers of clairvoyance. See Laura Moss's interesting discussion of magical realism in Rushdie, particularly in *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, for a further examination of the ordinary vs. the extraordinary in these works. In particular, Moss notes how while the magical realist form may be a manifestation of optimism for the future in the earlier novel, the later novel parodies the form and thus reverses the utopian movement of *Midnight's Children*.

⁵³ Price's assertion, unwittingly perhaps, reveals the problem of postmodernism for historical discourse. Price's essay is typical in its assertion of Rushdie's efforts to

deconstruct, denaturalize, and ultimately devalue traditional, positivist accounts of history. In doing so, however, he positions Rushdie as purely antagonistic towards a type of history that seeks to “preserve the ‘historical truth,’” favoring instead the mode of the artists who “explore the myriad dimensions of past experience” (104). In ceding the former type of discourse, however, Price suggests indirectly that Rushdie cannot talk about or assert anything about historical accuracy. It is thus a bit of a surprise when he suggests that Rushdie’s focus on the common and the everyday is somehow more accurate than some other types of history. Price does qualify this claim by asserting that this view of accuracy is purely from Saleem’s perspective, but we would do well not to cede the discourse of accuracy to those with a naïve trust in transparent referentiality and see how even those with complicated and difficult views of historical representation may, and must, insist on some sense of accuracy in historical representation.

⁵⁴ For a similar argument on the relationship of truth, falsehood, and alternative realities, see Rani Dharker’s “An Interview with Salman Rushdie,” reprinted in Chauhan (see esp. 59).

Conclusion

Ethics, Universality, and Postmodernist Historical Fiction

Throughout this study, I have employed several implicit terms and assumptions that are open to significant contestation. Indeed, they have been preemptively contested to such a degree that it hardly seems possible to reintroduce them. Nevertheless, I believe, it is worthwhile to make some of these implicit assumptions explicit, if only to make the stakes of my argument more clear and to contest the foreclosure of an important discussion. There are three major areas to address in this regard: 1) the use of terms like ethics, morality, and justice, 2) the exploration of notions of universality vs. notions of historical specificity as they relate to ethics, and 3) the specification of postmodernist historical fiction as a genre that expands to additional texts. I will deal with each only briefly as a means of providing some initial explorations of the ramifications of this study as opposed to a comprehensive and thorough analysis of each of these areas that could, and perhaps should, generate their own full-length studies.

I have up to this point contended that the insistent invocation of the historical real by Woolf, Swift, and Rushdie has been based on the necessity of material referentiality for establishing both an ethics and a resistant politics. I have only addressed the very real problem of defining ethics and the constellation of terms surrounding it tangentially, principally because I do not believe that the precise definition of ethics is easily established or within the primary purview of my argument. The other terms, particularly “morality” and “justice,” pose similar problems, and as such, they too are worth exploring, if only briefly. While the fastidious delineation of such terms may seem irrelevant to some, it carries significant importance to others struggling to oppose the

reinscription of hegemonic ideology where it has been, at least in the realms of critical and literary theory, on the run.

In this regard, the recent “turn to ethics” has met some significant resistance from the left, particularly as the ethics to be turned to has been regarded suspiciously as merely the return to the values of bourgeois patriarchy, whiteness, and heteronormativity so convincingly deconstructed by various poststructuralist-influenced schools of theory. It is this fear that Judith Butler voices in “Ethical Ambivalence,” when she asserts, “I’ve worried that the return to ethics has constituted an escape from politics, and I’ve also worried that it has meant a certain heightening of moralism and this has made me cry out, as Nietzsche cried out about Hegel, ‘Bad air! Bad air!’” (15). Butler’s radically constructivist treatment of gender as performativity is, quite correctly, seen both by her and by others as a significant blow against patriarchal discriminations constructed on the basis of an inviolable biologism that conveniently constructs morality for both genders at the expense of women’s freedoms. Similarly, as I discussed in the Introduction, the pseudo-scientific constructions of race that were the building blocks for a purportedly objective racism cannot remain in place when race is itself revealed as contingent and constructed. Butler’s fear is that the notion of some kind of universal ethics introduces the possibility that any rigidly defined rules and codes will inevitably restrict someone’s freedoms of thought, action, and/or identity, and will perpetuate hegemony. That is, any purported universal ethics is inevitably a particularist one that reflects hegemonic ideology. While this may well be the case, reversing the relevant terms here reintroduces the necessity of ethics even in its repudiation. That is, if we are to come to any conclusions about the necessity of opposing both the ideology and the deeds of longstanding hegemonies like bourgeois patriarchy, heteronormativity, whiteness, etc.,

we can only do so from an ethical position that indicates that the “right” thing to do is to work against power as long as it exists.

It is this reversal of terms that leads Butler, in this essay, to admit to some kind of ethical necessity and she, like many other poststructuralist theorists, when faced with this dilemma, turns to Levinas. In doing so, Butler invokes Levinas’s definition of the ethical relation:

The ethical relation is that of a passivity beyond passivity, one that escapes from the binary opposition of passive and active; it is an ‘effacement,’ a ‘bad conscience,’ a primordial exposure to the Other, to the face of the Other, to the demand that is made by the face of the Other. “To have to respond to [the Other’s] right to be — not by reference to the abstraction of some anonymous law, some juridical entity, but in fear of the Other. My ‘in the world’ [...] my ‘place in the sun,’ my ‘at homeness,’ have they not been the usurpation of the places belonging to the other man already oppressed and starved by me.” (Butler, “Ethical Ambivalence” 27, n2; see also Cohen 38).

The ethical relation, as defined here, bears a striking similarity to the Christian golden rule, as ethics, in this case, is defined almost completely by the subject’s relation to someone else. The substantial difference here is that whereas the “golden rule” dictates behavior (“do unto others”) this Levinasian ethics is defined by passivity and “recognition.” It requires such a deep acknowledgment of the Other’s existence that guilt and fear seem to be the only response. In the rarefied air of Theory, this definition of ethics seems useful, except when we realize that any delineation and adoption of such a theory within social praxis results in the kind of “juridical entity” to which Butler is opposed. That is, ethics is, by its nature, a desirable thing and therefore defining it, as Butler does via Levinas, functions as an injunction to follow that definition. The definition is an instruction on how to be ethical. This injunction is a Law of sorts if it is to be taken seriously at all. That is, the presumption made in the general “turn to ethics”

is that ethics is worth defining precisely so that we can work on making both our attitudes and behavior ethical. As such, the definition becomes an instruction, transforming the supposedly intensely interior experience of ethics into a social bond, if somewhat less constrictive than a formal Law.

In this case, the distinction that is commonly asserted between morality and ethics is somewhat problematic, if not nonexistent. Morality is linked in moral philosophy to justice, or “the right,” which is in turn based upon “redistribution.” Ethics, on the other hand, is linked to “the good life,” or “the good,” which is, in turn, based upon “recognition” (see Fraser “Recognition without Ethics?” 97). As such, “norms of justice are thought to be universally binding; they hold independently of actors’ commitments to specific values. Claims for the recognition of difference, in contrast are more restricted. Involving qualitative assessments of [...] relative worth, they depend on culturally and historically specific horizons of value” (Fraser, “Recognition” 97). The distinction offered here is one between the universality of morality and the specificity of ethics. Within this context, however, the distinction is impossible to maintain, as whoever decides what is “universally binding” does so in a culturally and historically specific context, making its universality questionable. Maintaining the distinction between morality and ethics does, however, have the advantage of allowing for a type of social interaction in which not all values held within a specific community are exported to another. However, this advantage only functions if the values in question are defined as part of a community’s ethics and not part of their moral justice. If they are defined in the latter way, and therefore as universal, imperialist exportation of values, or internal suppression of behavior becomes no less likely.

Again, however, the mere opposition I have just expressed to the imposition of one community's values upon another is made from an ethical and, quite possibly, moral position in which such acts of cultural imperialism are defined as "wrong" (or bad) and a more egalitarian approach is defined as "right" (or good). That is, any political stand of this kind is based on an ethics. Even political decisions made for only economic reasons derive from an ethics that suggests that the economic frame of reference is the most important, however much someone with a different set of ethical principles may disagree. The impossibly subtle distinction between morality and ethics does not solve any of these hypothetical problems and certainly no real ones.

In this, I agree with Nancy Fraser to the degree to which she denies the fundamental distinction between justice/morality and recognition/ethics, a denial that also begins to slowly erode distinctions between universality and specificity. Her argument that injustice/immorality and misrecognition can both be ameliorated by participatory politics is also attractive, although not my primary concern. What is central to my claims is that regardless of the types or numbers of participants in a society's efforts to govern itself, it is impossible to arrive at a sense of justice or of ethics without looking at a society both as it currently exists and also how it has existed. The observation must then be followed by an assessment of what types of behavior, attitudes, and laws are just, unjust, ethical, or unethical. Certainly such decisions will be contingent upon the participants involved in the judging process, but the process of judgment, predicated upon material observation, is necessary regardless.

In this light, implicit to all of the texts I have studied is the sense that the precondition for an ethical society is possible to establish. This precondition is that of being able to observe, in its material existence, both the present and the past and to make

observations, even judgments, about them. For Woolf, the precondition for arguing for an ethics of pacifism and of women's social and political equality is based on an identification of injustices and inequalities in the history of Britain. For Swift, working-class history is an undeniable material fact, generating the ethical argument against its effacement. Likewise, for Rushdie colonial domination and its reiteration and reenactment in Pakistani and Indian politics are observable facts that can only be opposed politically by identifying them as ethically, or morally, wrong. The precondition for resistance is the identification of that which should be resisted: the immoral, the unethical, the unjust.

Derrida's warning against the perils of justice in "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority" is paradigmatic of the kind of aversion to the discourse of ethics and justice much poststructuralist thought evidences. In this essay, Derrida exposes how justice is inextricable from its enforcement and is therefore always contaminated with "force" or "violence," perhaps the essence of injustice. Likewise "history" and "myth" are deconstructed as part of one another with both invoking both "divine violence," or that violent which is without bloodshed, and also "foundational violence," the traditional kind accompanied by plenty of bloodshed. The inextricability of one from the other firmly establishes the danger of trying to establish justice through any kind of action, for any such action will be necessarily violent. It is this kind of thinking that leads to the Levinasian invocation of passivity beyond passivity, for even pacifism, as justice, is a kind of violence. It is also the kind of analysis that leads Slavoj Žižek to note that, within poststructuralist thought, "the moment one shows a minimal sign of engaging in political projects that aim seriously to change the existing order, the answer is immediately: 'Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag'"

(“Class Struggle or Postmodernism?” 127). While Derrida makes no such hyperbolic claims nor does he necessarily oppose justice in the abstract, it is the kind of political inference one can derive from his essay. Like Žižek, then, I wish to insist upon the possibility of action even though there are undoubtedly dangers within it. Included in this idea of action is the type of pacifism that Woolf advocates in *Between the Acts* and *Three Guineas*. This is not passivity beyond passivity, but the kind of pacifism that defines an ethics and makes a judgment. Likewise, I wish to insist upon the accessibility of experience even when the reference to experience is commonly denounced in similar ways as Derrida’s deconstruction of justice.

I do not suggest, in this, that one can ever be sure of what, in all circumstances, can be considered ethical, but ethics is a precondition for action, not an avoidance of it and as such, it is not inimical to politics as Butler initially suggests. They are, rather, inextricably related, and morality, while a more tainted term if the “moral majority” is any example, is bound to them as well. In all cases, however, the possibility, if not inevitability of maintaining the possibility of accessing and representing our past, as well as our present, is necessary for any discussion and delineation of these terms. That is, a refusal of the possibility of accessing history is a simultaneous refusal of ethics and morality, an unacceptable refusal, certainly. I do not wish, in this, to unlearn the lessons of poststructuralism. The complication of linguistic reference, along with the revelation of ideology beneath seemingly naturalistic and transparent discourse is essential to the construction of ethics and morality, not inimical to it. Žižek’s refusal to abandon either term of the either/or question of “Class Struggle or Postmodernism?” is useful here. Like Groucho Marx, and perhaps Karl as well, Žižek responds to this question with “Yes,

please!” asserting a fundamental need for both sides of the equation even though the latter is based upon materiality and the former is based upon its dissolution.

In typical postmodern fashion then, Joan Scott argues against any identification of “experience,” as such: “evidence of experience [...] becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (25). In response, it is necessary to note that the establishment of difference via discursive structures is itself an experience undergone by whole societies, and that evidence is needed to establish both the existence and the deployment of such structures. The claim that referentiality is not transparent does not obviate the necessity of some kind of referentiality, however vexed, if we are to be able to analyze the structures Scott identifies. All of the texts I have explored, then, take problems of reference extremely seriously, including their ideological and political repercussions. At the same time, however, they refuse to deny the fundamental possibility of seeing the real within and, at times, beneath discourse, precisely because of their political commitment, which is, in turn based on ethics.

As noted above, where the separation of morality and ethics cannot be maintained, the opposition between universality and culturally situated specificity begins to crumble. Certainly, the struggle to deny universality in favor of specificity has proven to be just as problematic as the effort to transform the specific into the universal. Habermas’s insistence on the utility of the public sphere as a model for developing a type of universal ethics is contested by critics like Nancy Fraser (“Rethinking the Public Sphere”) who argues that the concept of the public sphere is already culturally specific, generated by the values of the white, middle-class, male Enlightenment. She

concomitantly contends that any possibility for a functional ethics for the present moment must occur through the reconstruction of the public sphere to reflect that moment.

Ironically, however, the result is a more universal conception of ethics, applying to more people of more diverse backgrounds, genders, classes, and races. This more universal conception of ethics claims to be more specific in order to oppose a more limited conception that claims to be universal.

In all of this, it is clear that ethics can have no meaning unless situated within a particular social and material context but can have no utility unless it is possible to transfer it to other equally specific contexts. From that perspective, is worthwhile to follow the lead of a critic like Seyla Benhabib, who in *Situating the Self*, insists that universal values can be generated from within a particular cultural and social context and through the construction of a “generalized concrete other.” (6). Without necessarily subscribing to this concept in all of its particularities, it pinpoints the need for both specificity and universality, as well as some degree of referentiality. Likewise, such universality can and must exist between times as well as spaces. That is, all theorists of time note that the present is always fleeting. For practical purposes then, we must be able to transfer the ethics of the past into the present because the present is simultaneously always and never available. The capacity to transfer values, ethics, even observations implies, indeed demands, some degree of universality. That is, while it is necessary to keep any delineation of ethics open to revision and discussion as the present moment dictates, it is also necessary that such a delineation last for more than just the “present,” or it will necessarily be gone before it is articulated.

Woolf and Swift’s attempts to theorize the present in such a way as to make it both “matter” in the material sense and matter in the sense of significance reflect this

need. That is, they insist that ethics can only be constructed through an observation of the real of the past and that that sense of the real can be transferred to the present, allowing the ethics generated from that observation to be applied in the now. Neither suggests that such an observation is easy to accomplish, nor is the process of accessing the past in the present one of transparent reportage, but both authors do insist that it is both possible and necessary. The transfer of lessons learned from the past to the present is not possible within a species of thought that is predicated only upon culturally situated specificity. That is, all events, thoughts, and actions must have some component of transferability, or some degree of universality, just as they arise from and are constituted by specific historical and cultural situations. Terdiman's injunction to see memory as both reproduction and representation is again productive in this case because of its insistence on the possibility of bringing the past into the present. Similar to the dialectic nature of memory (and history), ethics must be constituted dialectically both of specificity and universality. The effort to isolate one from the other is more likely to lead to political paralysis than to productive action because no two times and places are precisely the same, even when separated by seconds, as opposed to days, weeks, months, or years.

The necessity for the capacity to transfer both observations about the world and construct a workable ethics based upon that observation does not, of course, guarantee that such reference is possible. Rather, our needs rarely correspond precisely with reality. I do not then suggest that the texts studied here guarantee the possibility of reference but that they both insist upon it and offer new ways to think about reference that contribute to the discourse in important ways. The general theoretical hegemony of poststructuralism has led to the widespread interpretation of these texts as denying historical reference as

anything beyond construction. These texts do not make such a denial. Instead they offer ways to approach the past to uncover its material reality that are productive and allow readers to see additional texts, both historical and fictional, in new ways.

Certainly both *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *Maus* yield more than a desperate need to access the past when viewed through the prism of nonnarratability and anti-narrativity offered by Woolf, Swift, and Rushdie. *The Book's* refusal of a narrative that connects all of its parts can, for instance, be seen as a refusal of the unifying, thematizing, and meaning-generating capacities of narrative, while *Maus's* occasional overlaying of images of the represented past of the death camps onto and in the same frame as the represented present in Rego Park indicate how the past and present are not as inviolably separate as some versions of constructivist historiography suggest. In both of these approaches, a glimpse of the real is theorized.

In this, I do not wish to assert that all texts commonly labeled as postmodern insist upon a level of the historical real that both resists and precedes discourse, but that the homogenization of these texts has made this strain of thought difficult to see. The expansive scope of a work like Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* gives a sense of sameness to the discourse of postmodernism that inhibits the analysis of the specificity of any one text. My own expansive treatment of individual texts, on the other had, inhibits the analysis of the degree to which transferability from one text to others (and to the broader world) is possible. Briefly, then, I wish to suggest that the ideas presented in these texts are relevant for other works of fiction that may, if analyzed more expansively, give further insights into the nature of historical reference.

In, for instance, novels like Ian McEwan's *Atonement* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession* the majority of their "stories" are deeply textual, with the former evidencing a

wide cross-section of pastiches of literary styles and documents and the latter offering both family history and military history as a literary production of one of the main characters. Both novels, however, reverse the common conception of postmodernism by revealing, at their conclusion, a level of truth and reality that the novel's central narrative never offers. In *Possession*, particularly, the "Postscript 1868" (552-55) offers an authoritative voice offering the truth of what happens, despite the fact that none of the novel's narrators or textual authorities can possibly know about it. In this, the materiality of history is suggested, even as it is subsumed within the narrative of the novel itself.

Other postmodern novels, like Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* and Carlos Fuentes's *Terra Nostra* offer theorizations or versions of time that refuse its conception as linear and progressive, denying the possibility that the past is inaccessible, as Swift does in *Waterland*. *Terra Nostra* presents various historical and fictional eras simultaneously, suggesting not only a fictional world that comments upon our own, as Rushdie does, but also the possibility of bringing one time into contact with another. Also like Rushdie, Winterson asserts truths through the identification of lies, while simultaneously denying the nature of time as it is normally considered both within Enlightenment and poststructuralist discourse.

Lies 1: There is only the present and nothing to remember.

Lies 2: Time is a straight line.

Lies 3: The difference between the past and the future is that one has happened while the other has not.

Lies 4: We can only be in one place at a time.

Lies 5: Any proposition that contains the word 'finite' (the world, the universe, experience, ourselves. (90)

While Winterson's final two lies seem more in line with general conceptions of postmodernism, "Reality as something which can be agreed upon" and "Reality as truth" (90) neither denies either "reality" or "truth" as materially accessible. Rather they are not equivalent, as Rushdie too suggests, and reality is never transparently evident. The denial that time is a straight line and that there is only a present suggests the possibility of accessing the past, as does the strange reverse assertion that we can be in more than one place at a time. The erasure of the distinction between past and future also indicates a continuity between them and an accessibility that is also indicated by a novel like D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, in which it is the future which continually "returns," in the fashion of the Freudian past, as the Freudian narrative compulsion is simultaneously denied.

Likewise, Caryl Churchill's play *Cloud 9* functions, like *Between the Acts*, both as a denaturalization of hegemonic discourse in both present and past, and as the assertion of the possibility of accessing the materiality of both. In particular, the embodiment of present and past subjects within the same actors suggests continuity and transferability as opposed to historical inaccessibility. Gabriel García Márquez's delineation of the banana massacre as a truth obscured by most traditional histories predicts the concerns of Rushdie in regard to the Emergency and the Amritsar massacre, while deploying many of the same narrative and non-narrative strategies. Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus*, E. L. Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* likewise have varying degrees of dependency upon the historical past and the attribution of such dependency to the effort to deconstruct traditional histories may be reductive. In particular, Grass's allegiance to historical specificity and representation has led many to read him as a precursor to Rushdie, and to

read Rushdie as postmodernist historical fiction indicates how Grass may be read in similar ways.

Even texts as strange and fanciful as Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire* *Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* offer possibilities for accessing the real. Carter's thematization of narrative as desire, along with the death of Dr. Hoffman and the destruction of his desire machines, suggests the possibility again of a real beyond narrative. Dick's alternate history of a world in which the results of World War II are reversed installs the real within it, as the titular character is the one person in the book who has access to our own reality, writing a book in which the Allies do win the war. The installation of an object that represents reality, like the Man's book can also, perhaps, be seen in a novel like Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* in the figure of the parrot, while the 1/2 chapter in Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* installs a belief in transhistorical "love" that exceeds the discourse that surrounds it.

It is not my contention that a close and expansive reading of each of these texts would reveal that they theorize the real in the same ways, or even that anti-narrativity would necessarily be the strategy deployed in each of them. Rather, it is important to rely on their own specificity to discover what they can teach us about historical reference precisely because the capacity for historical reference is a necessity. Hayden White's assertion that an explosion of traditional narrative history is necessary for a full exploration of history's aesthetic potential may be true, but it is also true that a variable and extensive approach to historical reference offers important possibilities for accessing the real, something that is necessary for the construction of ethics, and therefore for political action.

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