

The Angel of Ferrara

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Submitted for the degree of PhD

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Benjamin Woolley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'B' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Benjamin Woolley

Date: 1st October, 2014

Abstract

This thesis comprises two parts: an extract of *The Angel of Ferrara*, a historical novel, and a critical component entitled *What is history doing in Fiction?*

The novel is set in Ferrara in February, 1579, an Italian city at the height of its powers but deep in debt. Amid the aristocratic pomp and popular festivities surrounding the duke's wedding to his third wife, the secret child of the city's most celebrated singer goes missing. A street-smart debt collector and lovelorn bureaucrat are drawn into her increasingly desperate attempts to find her son, their efforts uncovering the brutal instruments of ostentation and domination that gave rise to what we now know as the Renaissance.

In the critical component, I draw on the experience of writing *The Angel of Ferrara* and nonfiction works to explore the relationship between history and fiction. Beginning with a survey of the development of historical fiction since the inception of the genre's modern form with the Walter Scott's *Waverley*, I analyse the various paratextual interventions—prefaces, authors' notes, acknowledgements—authors have used to explore and explain the use of factual research in their works. I draw on this to reflect in more detail at how research shaped the writing of the *Angel of Ferrara* and other recent historical novels, in particular Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*.

I then examine the issue from the opposite perspective: the use of fictional devices in history, considering whether or not this compromises or enhances historical authority and validity.

I end by critically examining the prevailing notion that the borderline between fiction and history has become blurred, arguing that, while each influences the other, the distinction is one of type rather than degree.

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PLEASE NOTE: The creative component of the thesis is not included in this Open Access submission.

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A Practitioner's Perspective

Introduction

When Vladimir Nabokov was up for a chair in literature at Harvard, the linguist Roman Jakobson protested: ‘Gentlemen, even if one allows that he is an important writer, are we next to invite an elephant to be Professor of Zoology?’ (Boyd 1993: 303). The joke was revealing—literary culture is like the animal kingdom, writers part of its fauna, their acts to be observed by experts from a critical distance.

What, then, can authors say about literature? Does their role in creating it give them any kind of privileged insight into its production? The Booker-Prize winning critic and novelist A. S. Byatt apparently thought not. ‘I have never taught “creative writing”,’ she declared in 2000. ‘I think I see teaching good reading as the best way of encouraging, and making possible, good writing.’ (Byatt 2000: 1)

But when it comes to creating works that draw on scholarly research (in particular, historical research) as well as personal experience, imagination and literary connoisseurship, Byatt adjusts her view. While ‘it is customary for writer-academics to claim a kind of schizoid personality, and state that their research [...] has nothing to do with their work as makers of fiction’, she thinks it is ‘dangerous to disintegrate’ in this way. Hence, in her lecture ‘True Stories and the Facts in Fiction’, she felt it productive to explain ‘the relations of precise scholarship and fiction’ by examining the choice and uses of the historical sources she drew upon in the writing of her short stories ‘Morpho Eugenia’ and ‘The Conjugal Angel’. (Byatt 2000: 92)

This critical component of my PhD thesis follows her example. When it comes to knowing what and how ‘precise scholarship’ is used in a piece of creative writing, whether it is fiction or history, being a good reader is not enough. For this reason, the focus is on the practitioner: how writers combine history with fiction in the creation of their works.

I will concentrate on mostly Anglophone authors who have influenced my own writing, and who in one way or another reveal the operations of historical research in the construction of their works.

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The first chapter will consider the issue from the point of view of the novelist. I will look at my own experiences of writing the creative component of this thesis, and at the work of other historical novelists who have helped shape my own writing.

The second chapter will switch to the historian's perspective, looking at whether novelistic techniques such as storytelling and focalisation enhance or undermine historical authority.

The conclusion will attempt to expose the similarities and the differences between the two forms of writing (historical and fictional) with the aim of finding out if the border between the two is really as porous as is sometimes assumed, and what this says about the role of history in fiction.

Historical Fiction

History and fiction in their modern forms have grown up together, but historians and philosophers of history, as well as literary critics, generally treat the mixing of the two with suspicion if not disdain. Yet, since Sir Walter Scott invented the modern form, the historical novel has thrived.*

The first chapter will begin with an assessment of the genre, focusing on one of its defining features: the 'paratext', the prefaces, author notes or acknowledgements that signal a work's historical credentials. I will survey how much and how little these paratexts tell us about the scholarship used, and what they reveal about the authors' motives for drawing upon it, which range from filling the gaps in the historical record to bearing witness to lives neglected by posterity.

I will then attempt to construct a comprehensive and candid paratext for the creative component of my PhD, the historical novel *The Angel of Ferrara*, examining in detail what, how and why history was used in the work. I will identify the sorts of sources I drew upon, noting their type and quality and the reasons for my selection. I will try to

* Jane West seems to have given the genre its English name, in the title of her 1812 Civil War novel *The Loyalists: An Historical Novel* (see Hamnett 2011: 72), but most studies accept Scott's primacy, starting with Hugh Walpole's early critical history, published to commemorate the centenary of the author's death (Fleishman 1972 p.xv).

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follow the traces of these sources through the work, and consider their impact on the story. I will note where I have been faithful to the sources, and where I have ignored or changed them, and assess the reasons. I will also consider the issue of what sort of language to use, whether antiquated or modern, foreign or familiar.

Having looked at the uses of history in my own fictional work, I will try to get beyond the paratextual veil to explore the practices of other novelists, focusing on Hilary Mantel, who has been more revealing than most about her uses of research. I will look at her approach to the creation of Thomas Cromwell in her Tudor novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, and attempt to reverse engineer some of the books' scenes, to bring to the fore the history embedded in the narrative and see what she has done with it.

Mantel's portrait of Cromwell is so compelling, so convincing, the question arises: does it tell us something about the historical figure? Can verisimilitude reach such an intensity, it becomes a kind of truth?

The answer, according to Simon Schama, seems to be no, or perhaps yes. In a preface to a second edition of his one work of fiction—two, loosely connected novellas published under the title *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*—he was perplexed by the confusion of some critics over the work's fictional status. It had been misrepresented as some sort of intervention into the debate over the 'sure attainability of objective truth', to which he responded: 'Keep your hair on, it's fiction, two novellas about history, not history itself.'

I will end the chapter by considering the deep cultural anxiety aroused by the mixing of fact with fiction, and the celebrated historian's not altogether successful efforts to deal with the issue, to distinguish the 'inventive faculty' that forms an inevitable part of even the 'most austere scholarly report' with the products—as he claimed *Dead Certainties* to be—of 'pure invention'. (Schama 2013 np)

Fictional History

The contrast sometimes made between works of fiction and nonfiction is that one is about uncertainty and ambiguity while the other concerns what is fixed and known. When it comes to history, however, the distinction does not seem so clear. History is a

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discourse of doubt. It thrives on imagination, speculation and mystery as much as matters of fact. The second chapter will examine this aspect of writing history from the historian's perspective, how historians 'are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness', as Schama put it, and whether this results in a blurring of the borderline between what they and novelists produce. (Schama 2013 np)

Savage Kingdom, my non-fiction account of the settlement of Jamestown, England's first colonial foothold in North America, included a passage dealing with the famous story of Pocahontas, the daughter of a local Indian chief, saving the life of the colonist Captain John Smith. The historical sources available to reconstruct the episode were from a single dubious source, and heavily mediated by more recent tellings, notably by Disney. This made any hope of a definitive account impossible. In a way, the whole episode was originally presented as a kind of fiction, so should a historian not treat it as such? I will discuss my own efforts to deal with this episode through a shift of narrative perspective considered 'meticulously-plotted' by one reviewer but roundly condemned for 'papering over critical historical questions' by another.

I will also examine how I wrote about the Virginian Indians. Their language and culture has been extinct for centuries, so I drew on the stories recorded by the colonists to recreate the sort of oral history that the Indians might have told about themselves. This attempt proved to be a delicate and difficult task, but one I felt was essential to give the natives of Virginia a voice in an account of the English colonial venture.

I will then look at how other historians deal with such issues, specifically Luise White in *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* and Barbara Hanawalt in *Growing Up in the Middle Ages*. (Hanawalt 1993) Without embarking on a more general survey of the large body of literature about the nature of orality and its impact on notions of authority and truth, I will draw on these historians' innovative use of fictional techniques and devices to explore the poorly-documented worlds of the colonised, the dispossessed, the poor and the powerless—to, as Hanawalt put it, 'redress an imbalance in the records'. (Hanawalt 1993: ix)

I will end this section with a survey of the genre that attempts the most complete blending of nonfiction with fiction, research with story—what Truman Capote,

describing his masterpiece *In Cold Blood*, boldly styled the 'nonfiction novel'. I will assess what he, along with that other champion of the genre Norman Mailer, were trying to achieve. I will consider whether, by making themselves absent from the narrative, they achieved the 'objectivity' they and their supporters claimed, whether factual errors and invention compromised the works or simply reflected their novelistic status, whether the use of artistic techniques to tell a compelling story can be seen as evidence of it being true.

Fiction and History

The historiographer Hayden White argued that, among historians, 'in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are—verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences'. (Hayden White 1985: 82, author's emphasis) The final chapter will assess this claim from a more theoretical-critical perspective, and consider its implications for the historian and historical novelist.

Ironically, the tool that many critics have adopted to address the relationship between history and its 'counterparts in literature' is history. Though it threatens to become destructively recursive, the history of history is an established intellectual endeavour ('historiography') and, in the case of the development of modern history and realist fiction as forms of literature, has proved productive. It has revealed how modern fiction and history co-evolved, how fictional discourse came to define its factual counterpart and vice versa, in the process each freeing itself of the other's constraints, allowing the flourishing of the great narrative histories and realist novels of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent emergence of history and literary criticism as separate disciplines. (Gallagher 2006)

But in recent decades, this comfortable cohabitation has become strained, at least from a literary-critical perspective, as the rise of a poststructuralist body of theory has questioned the underlying convention that assumes a fact/fiction polarity. 'Narrative structure,' wrote Barthes, 'which was originally developed within the cauldron of fiction [...] becomes at once the sign and the proof of reality.' (Quoted in de Groot

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2009: 110) Reality, he and others argued, is an effect, not a fact, an aesthetic rather than objective quality; created, not discovered.

Novels that fall into the awkwardly named category ‘historiographic metafiction’—works such as John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*—are seen as a literary response of this idea, and I will look at a recent example, Laurent Binet’s 2012 prize-winning novel *HHhH*, to examine what such works tell us about the difference between fact and fiction. Binet’s book tries to tell the true story of an assassination attempt on a member of the Nazi elite, while a parallel commentary explores his anxiety that the ‘bright and blinding veneer of fiction’ might hide the reality of an important historical event. (Binet 2012: 4) I will look at how Binet dramatised this struggle through his metafictional techniques.

My first book, *Virtual Worlds* (1992), was originally commissioned as a chronicle of the technological fad of ‘virtual reality’, the idea that computers could be used to simulate worlds so realistic they would be indistinguishable from reality. However, researching and writing the book at the height of the poststructuralist boom in the early 1990s resulted in a wider cultural survey of the notion of reality in an increasingly artificial world.

One of the themes that emerged was the persistence of the notion of reality. Whether an aesthetic construct or not, it continues to thrive in the domain of science. Indeed, it has in some subjects, notably physics and cosmology, widened to embrace not just what is actual but what is possible (or virtual), on the basis that, in an infinite universe, everything that can exist does so. A literary analogy might be Borges’s notion of the Library of Babel—a library that contains every possible, intelligible text, including ‘the Gnostic gospel of Basillides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death.’ (Borges 1987: 81-82)

Though positivist notions of scientific truth are in many respects the antithesis of postmodern humanism, I will end the thesis with a tentative suggestion that adapting this conception of the real to the domain of the humanities might help us to make more sense of what history is doing in fiction, and how the one interacts with the other. The idea is inspired, ironically, by Hayden White, the champion of postmodern historiography. Echoing the comparison of literature to finance, he used a gambling

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analogy: 'Historical discourse,' he wrote, 'wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real.' (Hayden White 2005: 147)

Historical Fiction

In his study of the genre, Jerome de Groot observed: 'It might be a rule of thumb to define the historical novel as something which has an explanatory note from the writer describing their own engagement with the period in question.' De Groot characterised these as 'paratextual commentaries' (de Groot 2009: 6, 8)

The concept of the paratext was introduced by the French structuralist critic Gerard Genette, who came up with a whole menagerie of textual entities that roam the 'fringes and borderlands' of literary works. He saw them as part of the apparatus of the book, existing to 'present' a text, 'in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book'. He identified two subspecies of paratext, the 'peritext' and 'epitext'. The peritext comprises those textual elements that are 'around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance,' such as the title or preface. The epitext comprises those more 'distanced' elements—interviews, 'conversations', private and public communications, that surround the text's publication. Genette's purpose was to show how no text appears 'naked', that its paratext is its literal and vital context, helping to shape how it is read. What, for example, would reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* be like if it was not called *Ulysses*? (Genette 1997 pp.xix, 1, 4-5, 83)

In the case of the historical novel, paratexts—more specifically, peritexts, though the effusions in the public presses of historical novelists from Scott to Mantel suggest epitexts as well—have a particular prominence. They go far beyond exploiting the intertextual resonances of a title. They are often lengthy, elaborate productions by authors self-consciously struggling to justify the presence of the history in the fiction, as though the one does not naturally belong in the other.

The pattern is established early on in the genre's development, indeed in the work usually seen as the first modern example, *Waverley*.

In an introduction to the first edition, Walter Scott, writing anonymously (following the convention of the time), pondered at some length about his intentions in the

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production of the work, beginning with a meditation on his choice of another paratextual entity, the subtitle, "Tis sixty years since'. The 'election' of this 'supplementary title', he explained, should be considered a 'pledge' by the anonymous author—a daring one, he implies—to a 'special mode of laying his scene, drawing his characters, and managing his adventures'. This 'special mode' related to the 'author's' invocation of the past:

By fixing, then, the date of my story Sixty Years before this present 1st November, 1805, I would have my readers understand, that they will meet in the following pages neither a romance of chivalry nor a tale of modern manners; that my hero will neither have iron on his shoulders, as of yore, nor on the heels of his boots, as is the present fashion of Bond Street; and that my damsels will neither be clothed 'in purple and in pall,' like the Lady Alice of an old ballad, nor reduced to the primitive nakedness of a modern fashionable at a rout. From this my choice of an era the understanding critic may farther presage that the object of my tale is more a description of men than manners. (Scott 1814: 7)

In other words, Scott was declaring the invention of a new kind of novel and invoking 'this present 1st November, 1805' signalled its character. The date marked the sixtieth anniversary to the day that Charles Edward Stuart, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', left Edinburgh at the head of an army intending to invade England and restore the Stuart dynasty to the British throne.

The earliest reviews picked up on the subtitle's significance, and were sensitive to the literary, political, historical and even gender implications behind it. In one of the earliest notices, in the *Monthly Review*, the anonymous reviewer clearly appreciated the work's historical basis, noting how the fictional episodes and characters were 'subservient to a most spirited and accurate narrative of the military operations of the [Stuart] Pretender and his adherents'. The reviewer also pointed out that the book would 'probably disappoint all those readers who take it up at a circulating library, selecting it at random from amid sundry tomes of *Emmeline*, *Castel Gandolpho*, *Elegant Enthusiasts* and *Victims of Sensibility*', frivolous works associated with a predominantly female readership. (Anon 1814: 279-80)

The subtitle and introduction thus established *Waverley* as a manly production inspired by fact.

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As proof of this, the reviewer noted, ‘not with a view to disparage the author of this superior performance but by way of complement to our own sagacity [...] that most of the descriptions of local manners and customs, and some strong touches of character’ were to be found in a 1754 publication called *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friends in London*. (280) Scott acknowledged as much in a third edition of the novel, produced the same year in a desperate effort to keep up with the book’s phenomenal sales. Adding yet more layers of peritextual adornment, he provided a preface to the introduction responding to criticisms that he had ‘borne hard, and unjustly so’ upon the ‘national character’ of Highlanders. ‘Nothing could be further from [the author of *Waverley*’s] wish or intention,’ the preface protested. ‘Those who have perused the curious Letters from the Highlanders [...] will find instances of such atrocious characters, which fell under the writer’s own observation.’ (Scott 1814: viii-ix)

By the time of the 1829 ‘Magnum Opus’ edition, serving a now international craving for a series of works that ran to 48 volumes, the peritexts had proliferated to include a dedication to the king, an ‘advertisement’ about corrections and a lengthy ‘General Preface’ complete with several appendices. The purpose of the General Preface was ostensibly to justify the decision of the now famous ‘author of *Waverley*’ to maintain his anonymity or ‘secrecy’ even after the success of the books ‘to the amount of betwixt eleven and twelve thousand copies’—a justification somewhat undermined by the royal dedication, which included a very legible reproduction of Scott’s signature. (Scott 1829: xxi-ii)

Many books published at the time were anonymous—Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, for example, which appeared the same year as *Waverley*. She felt no obligation to explain the concealment of her name. The only peritext within the covers of *Mansfield Park* is a title page, which states that the novel is ‘by the author of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*’. The reader then turns the page, and the story begins. (Austen 1814)

So, what prompted Scott to labour on the issue in a preamble that takes up a sixth of the first volume of the Magnum Opus edition? His justifications were multifarious, inconsistent and unconvincingly coy. They included avoiding the ‘habits of self-

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importance which are...acquired by authors', claiming that 'there was scarce any degree of literary success which could have greatly altered or improved my personal condition' and because 'the mental organization of the Novelist must be characterised, so to speak craniologically, by an extraordinary development of the passion for delitescency'—in modern terms, novelists are hard-wired for anonymity. (Scott 1824: ii, xxi-xxii, xxvi) Such tortuous explanations are hard to read as more than a canny acknowledgement that a policy originally adopted for reasons of convention had become a useful instrument of publicity. The Scottish author and judge Henry Cockburn evidently suspected as much: 'If the concealment of authorship of the novels was intended to make mystery heighten their effect, it completely succeeded. The speculations and conjectures, and nods and winks, and predictions and assertions were endless, and occupied every company, and almost every two men who met and spoke on the street.' (quoted in Bautz 2007: 55)

There may, however, have been another motive at work, peculiar to the genre Scott had helped to invent.

As part of his peritextual manifesto for authorial anonymity, Scott provided what might least be expected: an autobiographical sketch. As a boy, he wrote,

...the chief enjoyment of my holidays was to escape with a chosen friend, who had the same taste with myself, and alternately to recite to each other such wild adventures as we were able to devise. We told, each in turn, interminable tales of knight-errantry and battles and enchantments, which were continued from one day to another as opportunity offered, without our ever thinking of bringing them to a conclusion. (Scott 1824 p.vi)

This apprenticeship as tale-teller was developed into adulthood by a long illness, which intervened 'as if it were by a species of fatality'. Prevented from working, he took advantage of a 'circulating library in Edinburgh...which, besides containing a most respectable collection of books of every description, was, as might have been expected, peculiarly rich in works of fiction'—the sorts of works derided by the critic in the *Monthly Review*. The predominance of fiction reflected the priorities of these private precursors to the public library, which were commercial enterprises reliant on subscription fees. 'I plunged into this great ocean of reading without compass or pilot,' the 'author of Waverley' continued, which resulted in him reading 'almost all the

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romances, old plays, and epic poetry' available. Thus, he learned the arts of fiction-writing in its various forms.

However,

At the same time I did not in all respects abuse the licence permitted me. Familiar acquaintance with the specious miracles of fiction brought with it some degree of satiety, and I began, by degrees, to seek in histories, memoirs, voyages and travels, and the like, events nearly as wonderful as those which were the work of imagination, with the additional advantage that they were at least in a great measure true. (Scott 1824: vi)

Through this vignette, the 'author of *Waverley*' seemed to be meditating on the peculiar role of authorship in a work that combines elements of fiction with nonfiction. He characterises the former almost as a form of pornography, its 'abuse' providing 'specious miracles' outside the 'respectable' collection of the library. This reflected views widespread in the literary elite at the time. The classicist, traveller and aesthete J. B. S. Morritt, who received a presentation copy of *Waverley*, referred with obvious disgust to the 'the thousand and one annual abortions of the circulating library,' and congratulated his friend on producing a work devoid of 'the slipshod, sauntering verbiage of common novels', and of the 'stiff, precise and prim sententiousness of some of our female moralists'. (Garside 1991: 30)

Such attitudes had their roots in the Scottish Enlightenment, which established the intellectual climate of Scott's era and work. (See Garside 1975) In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles-lettres*, for example, the economist Adam Smith claimed 'newness' to be 'the only merit in a Novel, and curiosity the only motive which induces us to read them.' Histories, on the other hand, narrated 'the more important facts and those which were most concerned in bringing about great revolutions, and unfolding their causes, to instruct their readers in what manner such events might be brought about or avoided'. (Adam Smith 1983: 97, 111)

But there are sly indications that the 'author of *Waverley*' was not fully enrolled with the Enlightenment project, in particular its privileging of the factual over the fictional. The author's description of the 'histories, memoirs, voyages and travels' he had read in the circulating library as being only in 'great measure' true surely contains a hint of

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irony. And he clearly identified his early 'wild adventures' into the realms of fable as formative in his development as a writer.

In a dedicatory epistle, one of the peritexts for his 1820 medieval Romance *Ivanhoe*, Scott explored this theme further. The letter was written by one Laurence Templeton of a quaintly-named estate called Toppingwold, near Egremont in Cumberland, to the antiquarian the Rev. Dr Dryasdust of York. Maintaining the distinctive ironic tone of Scott's other peritexts, Templeton referred obliquely to the author of *Waverley* in connection with the certain works, 'which, whatever other merit they possess, must be admitted to be...in violation of every rule assigned to the epopeia'—Scott's four novels preceding *Ivanhoe*, in other words, which could only be considered vulgar entertainments, incapable of achieving the transcendent literary effects of epic poetry. (Scott 1820: v) Whatever 'art' such works possessed lay in the use by the anonymous author 'of stores of antiquity which lay scattered around him, supplying his own indolence or poverty of invention...introducing real characters, and scarcely suppressing real names.' By drawing on this 'mine' of material, 'it was no wonder [the author of *Waverley*] should have derived his works fully more credit and profit than the facility of his labour merited.' (vii)

Templeton then declared that he intends to do the same with the 'traditions and manners of Old England'—that what the author of *Waverley* did for Jacobite Scotland and Rob Roy, he would do for Plantagenet England and Robin Hood.

However, Dryasdust had apparently already pointed out a fatal weakness in this enterprise: that, while the author of *Waverley* (referred to as 'the Scotsman' and, later, 'the Scottish magician') could draw on 'the very recent existence of that state of society in which his scene was to be laid', Templeton would have to rely on 'musty records and chronicles' going back to the twelfth century, 'the authors of which seem perversely to have conspired to suppress in their narratives all interesting details, in order to find room for flowers of monkish eloquence, or trite reflections upon morals'. (ix)

Templeton dismissed this objection with a shrug. Having reprised Dryasdust's concerns at some length (the reverend had apparently raised them during an earlier encounter), he declared himself confident he would find 'hints concerning the private life of our

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ancestors' in whatever 'slender proportion' was to be had, 'and therefore I protest, beforehand, against any argument which may be founded in the failure of the present experiment'. (xiii-xiv)

Templeton then considered concerns 'more peculiar to myself'—to an author of historical fiction.

He first addressed the issue that 'the very office of an antiquary, employed in grave, and, as the vulgar would sometimes allege, in minute and trivial research, must be considered as incapacitating him from successfully compounding a tale of this sort.' He accepted this risk, observing how Horace Walpole, an indefatigable collector, had managed to produce 'a goblin tale which has thrilled many a bosom' (Walpole's 1764 *Castle of Otranto*, the model of the Gothic novel). (xv)

But there was a graver concern: that, 'by...intermingling the fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions, and impressing upon the rising generation false ideas of the age which I describe.' Templeton responded by pointing out that some element of translation is inevitable in such a work if it is to excite 'interest of any kind' (a position Lukács echoed with the notion of the 'necessary anachronism' in historical fiction—see below p.271). As an example, Templeton cited Antoine Galland's first European translation of *A Thousand and One Nights*, 'in which, retaining on the one hand the splendour of eastern costume, and on the other the wildness of eastern fiction, he mixed these with just so much ordinary feeling and expression, as rendered them interesting and intelligible, while he abridged the long-winded narratives, curtailed the monotonous reflections, and rejected the endless repetitions of the Arabian original'. (xvii)

Finally, Templeton accepted historical errors would arise in the work, but 'it is my comfort that errors of this kind will escape the general class of readers', suggesting that the story's historical validity was otherwise irrelevant. (xxvii)

In other words, while Scott seemed to accept dryasdust scholarship to be an essential element of the historical novel, what mattered most was the author's capabilities as a writer of fiction, drawing on the exercise of the imagination to render 'interesting and

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intelligible' those episodes in distant times and places that would otherwise remain obscure.

Scott's peritexts are in many respects as important to understanding the nature of the genre he helped invent as the texts themselves. Through his ingenious exploitation of the conventions of anonymity and pseudonymity as devices to give him ironical distance from the fiction, he opened up the peritextual space through which authors of future historical novels could explore the complex issues invoked by this 'special mode' of storytelling, in particular the challenge of balancing authority with art.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton demonstrated the importance of Scott's legacy in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1836), his first and most successful historical novel. Publishing the book under the name of 'the author of "Pelham"', his 1828 'silver fork' novel of manners, he included a preface that stated in bolder terms what Scott had explored through the more refractive lens of irony. Citing the preface to Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Bulwer-Lytton declared:

As the greatest difficulty in treating of an unfamiliar and distant period is to make the characters introduced 'live and move' before the eye of the reader, so such should doubtless be the first object in a work of this description:- and *all attempts at the display of learning ought to be considered but as means subservient to this the main requisite of fiction*. The first art of the Poet (the Creator) is to breathe the breath of life into his creatures—the next is to make their words and actions appropriate to the era in which they are to speak and act. This last art is perhaps the better effected by not bringing the art itself constantly before the reader—by not crowding the page with quotations and the margin with notes. Perpetual references to learned authorities have, in fiction, something at once wearisome and arrogant. They appear like the Author's eulogies on his own accuracy and his own learning—they do not serve to elucidate his meaning but to parade his erudition. *The intuitive spirit which infuses antiquity into ancient images is, perhaps, the true learning which a work of this nature requires*—without it, pedantry is offensive; with it, useless. No man who is thoroughly aware of what Prose Fiction has now become, of its dignity—of its influence—of the manner in which it has gradually absorbed all similar departments of literature—of its power in teaching as well as amusing—can so far forget its connexion with History—with Philosophy—with Politics—its utter harmony with Poetry, and obedience to Truth as to debase its nature to the level of scholastic frivolities; he raises scholarship to the creative and does not bow the creative to the scholastic. (Bulwer-Lytton 1834 p.v, emphasis added)

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Thus, barely two decades after the self-deprecating 'Templeton' dared suggest that the novelist might have a case for drawing on history to supply 'his own indolence or poverty of invention', Bulwer-Lytton was bullishly proclaiming that the dignity, influence, reach and educational value of the poet's 'intuitive spirit' to be such that it should trump the demands of scholarship—that authority must yield to art.

Authors duly began to make increasingly free with scholarship, to such an extent that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the genre was widely denigrated. (See for example Battles 2009: 215) William Harrison Ainsworth, a protégé of Scott's and author of 'Newgate novels', came to embody the hack historical novelist, caricatured in *Punch* magazine as the 'Greatest Axe-and-Neck Romancer', dressed in Tudor costume, the handle of an axe resting against his knee, dagger in one hand and in the other a huge quill with 'Romance' written across the feather. (*Punch*, 24 September 1881, p.135)

Ainsworth in fact identified what must have been a growing mood of weariness with the self-consciousness expressed in peritexts. In a preface to the second edition of his first novel *Rookwood*, he proclaimed that he was 'no great lover of prefaces' which he looked upon as a 'matter of supererogation'—though he then proceeded to supererogate to the tune of six tightly-printed pages in which he cheerfully admitted that Dick Turpin, the main character, though historical, was 'a pure invention of my own' and that the book's most famous episode, Turpin's implausible 200-mile overnight ride from London to York on his horse Black Bess, was not based on serious historical research as there was 'nothing beyond oral tradition to go upon'. (Ainsworth 1834: 3-4)

As in Scott's time, however, it was the women who were seen as the principle agents of declining standards, both as dilettante producers and indiscriminate consumers. Leading the way in heaping opprobrium was an article in the *Westminster Review*, published in 1856. 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,' the author wrote, quoting the article's title, 'are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them—the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic.' The species identified as being least readable was 'the *modern-antique*'. Among its examples the critic found 'ladies constantly choosing to make their mental mediocrity

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more conspicuous, by clothing it in a masquerade of ancient names; by putting their feeble sentimentality into the mouths of Roman vestals or Egyptian princesses, and attributing their rhetorical powers to Jewish high-priests and Greek philosophers.’ A typical example of this ‘heavy imbecility’ was *Adonijah, a Tale of the Jewish Dispersion* (1856) by Jane Margaret Strickland (1800–1888), sister of the historian Agnes. ‘Instead of being written in plain language,’ this production was ‘adorned in that peculiar style of grandiloquence which is held my some lady novelists to give an antique colouring’. (Eliot 1856: 243, 253)

The author of this diatribe was George Eliot, (see Henry 2013: 35-6) and, for her, the problem was not the gender of the novelists she had so caustically reviewed—‘Happily, we are not dependent on argument to prove that Fiction is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men’—but their approach to writing as a profession. She despaired that ‘there are no barriers for incapacity to stumble against, no external criteria to prevent a writer from mistaking foolish facility for mastery’. ‘For it must be plain to every one who looks impartially and extensively into feminine literature, that its greatest deficiencies are due hardly more to the want of intellectual power than to the want of those moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence—patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer’s art.’ (254). And this ‘art’, in Eliot’s view, was peculiarly demanding when it came to historical fiction:

Admitting that genius which has familiarised itself with all the relics of an ancient period can sometimes, by force of its sympathetic divination, restore the missing notes in the “music of humanity,” and reconstruct the fragments into a whole which will really bring the remote past nearer to us, and interpret it to our duller apprehension,—this form of imaginative power must always be among the very rarest, because it demands as much accurate and minute knowledge as creative vigour. (253)

In some respects, Eliot was recasting the novelist’s use of the ‘relics’ of scholarship not as a right of exploitation, such as that of a prospector digging nuggets of gold from an exposed seam, but an obligation to a higher aesthetic cause.

Seven years after the publication of the *Westminster Review* article, Eliot made her own attempt at capturing this very rare ‘genius’ with her only work to fall squarely into the ‘species’ of historical novel, *Romola*. Set in Florence in the period directly following

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the death of the Tuscan potentate Lorenzo de' Medici and the rise of the charismatic preacher Savonarola, the novel tells the story of Romola, the daughter and amanuensis of the blind scholar Bardo de' Bardi. She marries the Greek Tito Melema, a shipwreck survivor who arrives in Florence seeking to recover his fortunes. As her husband flourishes, Romola becomes increasingly aware of his unscrupulous nature and struggles to reconcile her sacred marriage vows with a growing realisation that he is unworthy of them. This personal struggle mirrors the political one underway in Florence at the time, between the comforts of sticking with a corrupt church and the dangers of Savonarola's reforming zeal, discovering 'where the duty of obedience ends, and the duty of resistance begins.' (Eliot 1993: 462)

Writing *Romola* had obviously been a struggle for Eliot. Three years before its publication, she wrote to her publisher, 'Mr. Lewes has encouraged me to persevere in the project, saying that I should probably do something in historical romance rather different in character from what has been done before.' Her publisher flatteringly responded that he was sure 'you have such a power of imparting reality to every thing you write that your Romance will not read like Fiction. I expect that you will return Historical Romance to its ancient popularity'. (Quoted in Battles 2009: 216)

She did indeed 'do something rather different in character', as demonstrated in the novel's peritextual commentary. Unlike Scott and his followers, she begins *Romola* not with an introduction or preface but rather a 'Proem'—an archaic term associated with the works of Dante and Boccaccio. The narrator of the proem is not the author—anonymous, actual or fictional. Instead, the discreet voice of a sort of Virgilian guide emerges, acting as an intermediary between the reader's time and the past.

The proem's narration begins 'in the mid spring-time of 1492' suspended high above the world, looking down upon it alongside the 'angel of the dawn' (in early drafts, the 'star-quenching angel'). The angel is followed as he passes across Europe, from the Levant to the Pillars of Hercules, seeing the same 'great mountain shadows on the same valleys' as in the reader's time, and the same 'domes and spires of cities rising by the river-sides or mingled with the sedge-like masts on the many-curved sea-coast, in the same spots where they rise to-day'. In other words, it is a scene of continuity. And humanity is part of this continuity: 'we are impressed with the broad sameness of the

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human lot, which never alters in the main headings of its history--hunger and labour, seed-time and harvest, love and death.' (Eliot 1993: 3)

As the angel continues his westerly progress, 'our imagination pauses on a certain historical spot and awaits the fuller morning', which reveals a 'world-famous city': Florence. It stands 'as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the flux of human things, to remind us that we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ them, as the great mechanical principles on which those domes and towers were raised must make a likeness in human building that will be broader and deeper than all possible change'

Then the point of view abruptly shifts, plummeting to earth, to the perspective of a 'shade', the resurrected spirit of a Florentine citizen, gazing at the scene as the reader might, several centuries after 'his eyes last closed' on the city. He beholds it again from 'the famous hill of San Miniato' and marvels at how familiar it is so many centuries later, that it might even be possible 'to descend once more amongst the streets, and take up that busy life where he left it'. But then he begins to notice differences. The Franciscan church of San Croce has acquired an incongruous new bell tower. 'If it had been built in my day,' he observes, 'Filippo Brunelleschi or Michelozzo would have devised something of another fashion than that—something worthy to crown the church of Arnolfo [Arnolfo di Cambio, the original architect of Santa Croce].'

Discomfited by this, he notices that the city's walls have lost 'five out of the eleven convenient gates' and the defences that had once 'encircled the city as with a regal diadem'. This mystifies him:

Is the world become so peaceful, then, and do Florentines dwell in such harmony, that there are no longer conspiracies to bring ambitious exiles home again with armed bands at their back? (5)

Recalling his own times as a merchant and official, he begins to consider what else might have changed: Florence's elaborate system of governance? Its trade? Even its religion? Savonarola's preachings, after all, had been prophetic. 'How,' the spirit wonders, 'has it all turned out?'

He decides to go down 'to the streets below, on the beloved *marmi* in front of the churches, and under the sheltering Loggie' to find out, but the poem's narrator urges

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him not to, 'for the changes are great and the speech of Florentines would sound as a riddle in your ears'. (8-9)

L. P. Hartley's famous epigram about the past being a foreign country is reversed by Eliot's narrator—the present has become foreign, and the challenge for the historical novelist is in finding out why, discovering the operation of political and theological forces that sweep through history as the angel of the dawn sweeps across the world. 'These are difficult questions,' the narrator warns; 'it is easier and pleasanter to recognise the old than to account for the new.' (5)

Eliot's unorthodox choice of peritextual commentary in part reflects the novel's mode of publication. *Romola*, unlike Scott's *Waverley*, but like most fiction of the high Victorian era, was written to be published in serial form, appearing in *Cornhill Magazine* in fourteen monthly parts between July 1862 and August 1863. Eliot had not even settled the volume rights when *Cornhill's* publisher, Smith, Elder & Co, paid her the extraordinary sum of £7,000 to serialise the work (by way of comparison, the likes of Trollope, Bulwer-Lytton and Thackeray were receiving between £1,000 and £2,100 for the serial rights to their works). The generous offer had evidently concentrated Eliot's mind on how to set up her sophisticated historicist agenda at the beginning of a work that must plunge the magazine reader as quickly as possible into its imaginative world. Clearly, any sort of historical or philosophical treatise on sources or approach, or even the sort of playful authorial masquerading undertaken by Scott, might act as a barrier at the delicate and vital moment when a reader engages with the story. (xxviii-xxx)

But the proem also acted as an ingenious way of highlighting the profound and ambitious issues Eliot was hoping to embrace in the novel, specifically the relationship of continuity and change over historical time, the idea that identifying changes in what each generation considers immutable and eternal, rather than ephemeral and fashionable, is the basis of the most insightful and compelling history.

In this regard, the proem might be thought of as more successful than the book it introduced. *Romola* garnered generally poor reviews. The critic of the *Saturday Review*, writing soon after the volume edition came out, noted that 'the authoress has been tempted into a field where...her merits are obscured, and their effect impaired.

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She has left the description and study of English life, and has attempted to overcome the difficulties of the historical novel.’ (Anon 1863: 124) Leslie Stephen dismissed it as a ‘magnificent piece of cram’ (‘cram’, the verb as well as the noun, was his term of choice when it came to historical fiction, applied to Scott, among others). The ‘masses of information’, Stephen complained, were not ‘fused by a glowing imagination’; ‘the fuel has put out the fire.’ (Stephen 1926: 212)

Though the historical novel continued to thrive during the high Victorian and early Edwardian periods, the legacy of Scott’s and Eliot’s peritextual daring became neglected, almost as if the literary world had given up trying to make sense of the genre’s peculiarities and potentialities, being content to feed a hungry readership. The issues the ‘author of *Waverley*’ and the angel of dawn had been used to illuminate remained as obscure as ever, and authors seemed reluctant to deal with them except in the most rudimentary manner. A case in point is Thomas Hardy’s 1880 novel set in the era of the Napoleonic wars, *The Trumpet-Major*. Like *Romola*, it initially appeared in serial form, but without preface or introduction. Then, apparently ‘for the satisfaction of those who love a true story,’ Hardy added a preface to the volume edition that appeared as part of the 1895-6 ‘Wessex’ collection of his novels.

The reader is left in no doubt that the voice of the preface is the author’s. It is signed ‘T. H.’ and dated October 1895. Initially, the tone is matter-of-fact and down-to-earth, setting the scene as well as discussing the sources. The author reports that the ‘present tale’ was ‘founded’ on oral and written testimony, much of it gathered by himself. Reflecting his commitment to what Matthew Arnold dismissively described as ‘English provincialism’ (quoted in Fleishman 1972: 183), he also notes the inspiration of the ‘casual relics’ of the Napoleonic Wars littering the area around Weymouth in which the story is set:

An outhouse door riddled with bullet-holes, which had been extemporized by a solitary man as a target for firelock practice when the landing [a French invasion] was hourly expected, a heap of bricks and clods on a beacon-hill, which had formed the chimney and walls of the hut occupied by the beacon-keeper, worm-eaten shafts and iron heads of pikes for the use of those who had no better weapons, ridges on the down thrown up during the encampment, fragments of volunteer uniform, and other such lingering remains. (Hardy 1997: 4)

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Towards the preface's end, however, another, more persecuted tone sets in, at times approaching rancour. Hardy was apparently reacting to charges made in *The Critic* and in the *Academy* magazines in 1882 that a scene in the novel featuring the drilling of local militia drilling (chapter 23) had been plagiarised. In response, Hardy admits to using C. H. Gifford's 1816 *History of the Wars occasioned by the French Revolution* as a source, and was 'mistaken in supposing the account to be advanced as authentic, or to refer to rural England'. Gifford, it transpired, had copied from an account given by an American writer, which was reprinted in a travel book. In rather unconvincing mitigation, however, Hardy points out that the description he had copied 'does in a large degree accord with the local traditions of such scenes that I have heard recounted, times without number, and the system of drill was tested by reference to the Army Regulations of 1801, and other military handbooks.' (Ibid.)

Hardy's desire to set the record straight is striking. He was not by any means signed up to a positivistic view of history. 'Is not the present quasi-scientific system of writing history mere charlatanism?' a query in one of his notebooks wonders. He also classed *The Trumpet-Major* among his 'Romances and Fantasies' in the Wessex series, rather than 'Novels of Character and Environment', suggesting a lower commitment to historical realism than might be expected even of his other novels. (Fleishman 1972: 180-1, 185) So, the urge to prove that he had tried to maintain standards of historical scholarship in the research undertaken for the *The Trumpet-Major* is puzzling, and shows that anxieties concerning the role of history in historical fiction explored more satirically by Scott still rankled authors and critics alike—if anything, they had intensified. But Hardy's preface also demonstrated that efforts to find a literary way of addressing these anxieties had all but been abandoned.

It took Virginia Woolf—or not, depending how she is read—to find a more imaginative way of invoking and discussing these anxieties.

Orlando: A Biography (1928) was Virginia Woolf's only historical novel. It is also her only work to contain a substantial peritextual commentary—an odd, contentious production, taking the form of a list of acknowledgements. And what a list. It begins with her 'illustrious' literary forebears; 'Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Bronte, De Quincey, and Walter Pater', a selection,

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ordered according to no obvious scheme, which places her in a sophisticated, adventurous writing tradition, each author known for challenging and sometimes breaking generic boundaries in their work, both fictional and historical. There follows a roll-call of Woolf's similarly 'illustrious' coterie of collaborators, family and friends: members of the secret Cambridge Apostles, the Bloomsbury Group and its acolytes, aristocratic patrons—a total of fifty nine individuals, including novelists (Forster), poets (Eliot), intellectuals (Keynes) and painters (Duncan Grant). (Woolf 2012: 5-6) The sheer effusiveness is extraordinary, so much so that many critics have read its 'mock-solemnity' as a parody: of the literary and artistic world's cliquishness, of the peritextual commentary as a literary device, of the novelist's desperation for historical authentication. One of those thanked, Raymond Mortimer, described it as 'a parody of prefaces' that reflected the novel's 'tearing high spirits'. (Southworth 2012: 78-9)

A parodic reading, however, does not explain why the list features so many identifiable individuals to whom her gratitude seems to be sincere. To the longtime family friend Nelly Cecil, for example, she later wrote 'hand on heart, if that is the correct position' that her motives in thanking her in the preface 'were honourable affection, gratitude, esteem'. (Ibid.) But she would not need to put her hand on her heart unless she expected Cecil to suspect another motive.

There is evidence that she wished to demonstrate the book's factual authority. The first living person to be thanked, to whom she was 'specially indebted', was 'Mr C. P. Sanger, without whose knowledge of the law of real property this book could never have been written'. A barrister specialising in property law and intestacy is an unlikely figure to be given such a privileged mention in a modernist biographical novel. How could matters of jurisprudence have had such an influence in a fiction about the life of a poet who lives from the last days of Elizabeth I to the twentieth century, switching gender along the way?

Sanger had an interest in literature, having produced a meticulous and eccentric chronology of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, plotting the story's relationship to property and inheritance law. In the latter stages of *Orlando*, one of the main dilemmas faced by the gender-switching eponymous character is the ownership of property she had owned as a man. Returning from Constantinople,

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Orlando was to learn how little the most tempestuous flutter of excitement avails against the iron countenance of the law; how harder than the stones of London Bridge it is, and than the lips of a cannon more severe. No sooner had she returned to her home in Blackfriars than she was made aware of a succession of Bow Street runners and other grave emissaries from the Law Courts that she was a party to three major suits which had been preferred against her during her absence, as well as innumerable minor litigations, some arising out of, others depending on them. The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing; (3) that she was an English Duke who had married one Rosina Pepita, a dancer; and had had by her three sons, which sons now declaring that their father was deceased, claimed that all his property descended to them. (Woolf 2012: 124)

Evidently, it was important to Woolf's project for her account of the 'iron countenance of the law' to be as factual as the stones of London Bridge, and she asserts as much in the preface by acknowledging a well-known authority on the subject. It also indicates a commitment to scholarly standards, an attitude reinforced by the inclusion of an index—a highly unusual and extravagant paratextual addition to a fictional work.

The only historian Woolf acknowledges in her preface was Thomas Babington Macaulay—one of the 'illustrious' predecessors. But the book's debt to him was less likely to be as a historical source than as inspiration for *Orlando's* daring literary experimentalism. Macaulay saw any form of literature that drew on history as lying on 'debatable land', under the 'jurisdiction of two hostile powers...Reason and the Imagination'—just the kind of contested cultural territory that suited Woolf's modernist iconoclasm. (Quoted in Hamnett 2011: 134)

However, Woolf also acknowledges a debt to conventional historical sources. Alluding surely with due humility rather than parodic playfulness to 'whatever accuracy' the book might 'attain', she thanks her husband for 'the patience with which he has invariably helped my researches' as well as for his 'profound historical knowledge'. She thanks Margery Snowden, a family acquaintance, for her 'indefatigable researches in the archives of Harrogate and Cheltenham' which were 'none the less arduous for being vain'. And she thanks the 'officials of the British Museum and Record Office' for their 'wonted courtesy'. Her reference to Snowden—'not a particular favourite', according to one Woolf scholar—has a hint of satire, but this only adds to the contrasting sincerity of the acknowledgement of the nation's two main archival

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repositories and of her husband, a noted intellectual. In the process, she clearly signals the hard historical graft that went into the composition of the work and underwrote its historical credentials. (Southworth 2012: 94)

Since the publication of *Orlando*, the acknowledgement has become established as one of the main peritextual devices in historical novels for noting the use of authenticating research as well as personal or professional obligations. It helps address one of the main problems of peritextual commentaries, which is that they introduce 'a fundamental metafictional element to the form' which 'demonstrates that as a genre the historical novel provokes a certain anxiety and disquiet on the part of the writer.' (de Groot 2009: 9) To a certain extent, the acknowledgement overcomes this by using what might be considered a natural expression of humility and gratitude to manifest, as if by accident, evidence of the work's historical credibility. For example, in her bestselling 2010 'adventure' *The Historian*, Elizabeth Kostova makes no explicit claims about the factual basis of her story, but in a preface expresses her gratitude to the 'scholars' from the Universities of Bucharest, Michigan and Istanbul, and the much-thanked staff of the British Library, as well as the libraries of Philadelphia and the Rutherford Literary Museum. (Kostova 2010: viii-ix) In her successful debut historical novel *The Birth of Venus* (2004), set in Renaissance Florence, Sarah Dunant states: 'This book is built on a scaffold of history constructed from a number of contemporary sources, eminent scholars and art historians'. She goes on to thank some of them, and list their works in a 'short bibliography'. (Dunant 2004: 410)

As well as the acknowledgement, another peritextual device used in contemporary historical fiction is the coda, a note at the end of the novel to provide the reader with supplemental information about the outcome of the events featured in the fiction. In her Booker-Prize-Winning *Regeneration* trilogy, for example, Pat Barker adds an author's note for readers 'who may wish to know more about some of the historical characters encountered in this novel', and goes on to explain what happened to them, as though they might have stepped out of her fiction and back into the realm of fact once her story was concluded. She follows her summary of these aftermaths with a list of historical works that 'can be unreservedly recommended'. (Barker 1996: 591)

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Few of these more contemporary authors, however, manifest the interest or even awareness demonstrated by their predecessors in the complexities surrounding the use of history in fiction. Reflecting, perhaps, the genre's continuing success, it is as though the issue, while not resolved, has been rendered irrelevant by convention and tradition. Some give advice as to how a discrimination should be made between fact and fiction, but in the form of a glib disclaimer that reverses the peritextual pleadings of credibility. 'The reader may ask how to tell fact from fiction,' Hilary Mantel, now doyenne of the genre, wrote in the Author's Note for *In a Place of Greater Safety*, her 1992 debut novel about the French Revolution. 'A rough guide: anything that seems particularly unlikely is probably true.' (Mantel 1993: x) Likewise, prefacing his novel *Sweet Thames* (1992), about London's sanitation crisis of the 1840s, Matthew Kneale wrote: 'The more strange, painful or ludicrous an incident may seem, the more closely based upon actual occurrences it is likely to be.' (Kneale 2001: n.p.)

When it came to writing the historical fiction that makes up the creative component of this thesis, I felt no such complacency. Coming from a background of writing biography and historical nonfiction, I fretted about how the history would shape the story, and the story the history. Would I exercise my artistic licence responsibly? What, even, did the licence permit me to do?

§

The Angel of Ferrara tells a story from three perspectives: that of Tarquinia Molza, a singer in the court of the duke of Ferrara, Filippo Fiorini, an agent or 'factor' in the household of the duke's brother and Giacomo Bonaccioli, a debt collector. All of them are trying to find the singer's son, a chorister who went missing after singing practice. The story takes place over a two-week period in the spring of 1579, while celebrations are underway for the duke's wedding, his third, which everyone is hoping will produce a male heir.

Though the choice of plot, period, setting and characters for the *Angel of Ferrara* was the result of a complex range of personal as well as professional aspirations and circumstances, the starting point was a historical paper, an article published in *Renaissance Quarterly* entitled 'Guglielmo Gonzaga and the Castrati' by Richard Sherr (1980).

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The paper concerned the development of the idea of castrati in the middle of the sixteenth century in the court of Guglielmo Gonzaga, third Duke of Mantua (1538-1587). Mantua was one of a string of Italian aristocratic city states (such as Parma, Bologna and pre-eminently Florence) that had managed to remain independent of various imperial encroachments, and were in ferocious competition with one another, the main focus of Gonzaga's rivalry being Duke Alfonso II d'Este (1533-1597), who ruled the neighbouring city of Ferrara. (Romanelli)

The instruments of this competition were forms of ostentation that demonstrated the potentates' ability to raise finance, attract talent and command attention. I was intrigued by the notion of castrati as an invention—like oil painting (or, indeed, electricity or the internet), developed in response to the cultural pressures of the era.

I could have attempted a conventional historical account of this development, but felt that, on the basis of the archival traces that apparently survived, there was little more to add, and I would be prevented from animating, so to speak, the ferocious competitive pressures and the hidden social effects at work, the contrast between the transcendental beauty of aristocratic/plutocratic ostentation and the sometimes savage mechanisms that gave rise to it.

During the 1570s and 1580s, the region of Italy now known as Emilia Romagna was a cultural battleground, and singing one of the main armaments. Ferrara's Duke Alfonso had developed what was perhaps the most effective weapons yet: a group of three women singers known as the *Concerto delle Donne*. In 1582-3, the musician Giulio Caccini, part of the Florentine musical establishment, described them as 'three angels of paradise' who sing 'so miraculously that it seems to be impossible to do better'. (Newcomb 1980: 20-1, 90)

The wedding taking place in the novel is Alfonso's to Duke Guglielmo's 15-year-old daughter Margherita. Rather than introducing a period of rapprochement between the two dukes, the marriage seemed to intensify their rivalry, culminating with Guglielmo walking out on a performance of Alfonso's singing ladies, proclaiming he would 'rather be an ass than a lady'. (24) It was this jealousy, going back more than a decade, that seemed to prompt the Mantuan duke's search for a new kind of performer that would trump Alfonso's 'angels of paradise'.

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Sherr's study of Guglielmo's efforts revealed that the idea of using castrated boys as singers was first mooted, at least in the Gonzaga archives, in the mid-1560s, when a letter was received from Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, Duke Alfonso's uncle, offering the Mantuan duke a French 'cantoretto'. The term is ambiguous, but as Sherr points out, other words were more conventionally used to refer to boy sopranos (*putti, fanciulli, figliuoli, or cantorini*), and a later reference seems to indicate that Ippolito was referring to a castrated singer called Guglielmo Fordos.

The uncertainty over terminology shows how the implications and opportunities presented by this new instrument of courtly grandeur were still being worked out, and this was reflected in the difficulties Guglielmo continued to have in finding suitable candidates. Agents scouring France, Spain and Rome on the duke's behalf only managed to find a handful of examples, most of poor quality and prohibitively expensive. In the end, Guglielmo's desperate Spanish agent Girolamo Negri suggested that the duke 'make his own'. (Sherr 1980: 34-6) It was this notion that inspired the plot for *The Angel of Ferrara*.

The other main contribution of Sherr's paper to the novel's setting and story related more to the absence rather than presence of historical evidence. As Sherr acknowledged, very little is known about the origins of the idea of castrati, the subject of human castration being taboo in Christendom, where it was prohibited under Biblical law (Deuteronomy 21.3: 'He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord.'). As Guglielmo's efforts showed, the castration of boys for the purposes of producing a distinctive voice seems first to have occurred in Europe in France and Spain, but how it reached those countries is a matter of conjecture (Sherr suggested French contact with the Ottoman empire via Marseilles, or Moorish influences in Spain, but acknowledged problems with both explanations). (Sherr 1980: 47)

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As to how castrati were 'made', in Europe or elsewhere, even less is known. Quoting a German historian of music, Sherr characterised it as a 'crime buried in the night'.* (46) At the time of Guglielmo's investigations, it still appeared to be a somewhat hit-or-miss enterprise, singers reportedly having weak or hoarse voices, some being unable to hit high notes or to sing softly, and there are indications the trauma of mutilation rendered them 'fickle', as one exasperated agent put it. (42)

The earliest known English account of methods of castrating boy singers dates to more than a century later. Robert Samber's *Eunuchism Display'd* (1718) was a translation of a French text of 1707, *Traité des Eunuques* by Charles Ancillon, spelling out what was involved:

This Operation was commonly effected, by putting the Patient in a Bath of warm Water, to soften and supple the Parts, and make them more tractable; some small time after they pressed the Jugular Veins, which made the Party so stupid and insensible, that he fell into a kind of Apoplexy, and then the action could be performed with scarce any pain at all to the Patient... Sometimes they used to give a certain quantity of Opium to the Persons designed for Castration, whom they cut while they were in their dead Sleep, and took from them those Parts which Nature took so great Care to form; but as it was observed, that most of those that had been cut after this manner died by this Narcotick.

Ancillon also reported the 'Persian' practice of using 'Hemlock and other Herbs'. (Ancillon and Samber 1718: 14-6)

An 1877 report in *The Lancet* described another form of castration performed on imperial Chinese eunuchs, involving the removal of both penis and scrotum 'by a single sweep of the operator's knife or scissors' and a small disk of wood or pewter being inserted into the wound, which was then washed with pepper and water. 'The patient is then walked for three hours without rest, and for the following three days he is allowed no drink, while the plug fills the urethra. On the fourth day the plug is removed and if the urine flows he is looked upon as cured; but, should the overstrained bladder refuse to act, he is left to die'. (Quoted in Flood 1899: 297)

* "Lichtscheu and heimlich liegen die Anfänge des Verbrechens in geheimnisvolle Nacht begraben."

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It was a conjectural combination of these practices that formed the basis of the experimental procedure portrayed in *The Angel of Ferrara*. I fretted about including the Chinese procedure described in the *Lancet* article, given that there is no record of it being used in Italy or elsewhere in Europe, and that I had introduced it for reasons that were ultimately sensationalistic (it increased the stakes for the boys being experimented upon). However, invoking the principle that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, I eventually decided the contrivance was justified.

Given Sherr's scholarship, an obvious setting for the story was Mantua, but other factors favoured Ferrara. Not only was the Estense court heavily invested in musical innovation, but Duke Alfonso, Guglielmo's rival, was known to have employed a Spanish 'eunuch' called Hernando as early as 1562, who, according to the Neapolitan musician resident in the court of Parma, had been 'admired' as one of the best sopranos in Italy. (Guerzoni 2001)

Ferrara and its ruling Este family was also the subject of a historical study that helped develop one of the novel's main fictional objectives, which was to observe Renaissance aristocratic privilege and ostentation from a commoner's as well as courtier's perspective. Such a point of view is by its nature hard to trace through the historical record. However, Diane Yvonne Ghirardo's 2001 study 'The Topography of Prostitution in Renaissance Ferrara' turned out to be a particularly fruitful source.

Unusually for an academic article, the opening of Ghirardo's paper reads like a work of fiction:

On any given morning in 1471, the prostitute Giovanna of Venice, then resident of a Ferrarese brothel on Via Malborghetto, might have contemplated with resignation the options open to her for a day on the town [...]. Unless it was Saturday and she planned to go to the public market near the cathedral, legally she could not leave her *chiuso* (single room or small residence) at all [...]. She was also prohibited from frequenting any of the city's inns or hostelries on pain of immediate expulsion. (Ghirardo 2001: 402)

Drawing on an impressive range of contemporary Italian sources (including maps, official records such as the *Diario ferrarese dall'anno*, and archives of wills, inventories, contracts and surveyors' records), Ghirardo provided a vivid portrait of the 'spatial

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practices' enacted in the city's public and private domains, and how they shaped the lives of those considered at the time as historically inconsequential.

Tuohy's magisterial *Herculean Ferrara* (2002) related to an earlier period, but recounted in extraordinary detail the artistic and architectural environment created by the patronage of Alfonso's great grandfather Ercole I (1471-1505), and the craftsmen responsible for it. This had shaped the city the great grandson ruled, and established the level of prestige he struggled to maintain.

Tuohy's work also brought a focus on the economics of ostentation, and how aristocrats exploited an increasingly sophisticated financial system to pay for it. 'The duke [Ercole] was never really in a position to be able to afford all the expenditure necessary to sustain the court festivals or his building projects,' Tuohy revealed. 'Much of Huerculean Ferrara was built on borrowed money.' (Tuohy 2002: 122) The result was a deficit-driven economy which the duke and his successors could only sustain by becoming increasingly reliant on an influx of Spanish Jews who arrived in the city in the fifteenth century, providing a source of desperately-needed liquidity and tax revenue. But, as Tuohy showed, their presence came at the cost of considerable popular unease:

In 1481 a riot broke out against a Jew accused of crucifying a child, and the duke in person had to go and quell the mob...because the Jew was a banker who held much property in pawn, some of which was the duke's, and he feared the consequences of the Jew's house being sacked. (30)

In 1490, when the duke came under the sway of the reformist Florentine cleric Savonarola, the Ferrarese Jews were forced to wear yellow badges of identification, just as prostitutes were required to wear a yellow mantle. (Tuohy 2002: 172, Ghirardo 2001: 402)

With Sherr's, Ghirardo's and Tuohy's works helping establish the setting, other historical research played a decisive role in the development of the characters. Anthony Newcomb's 1980 two-volume monograph *The Madrigal in Ferrara* introduced the name Tarquinia Molza, a widow from Modena (part of the Este dukedom) who became a prominent member of Alfonso's *Concerto delle Donne*. Unusually for a commoner, Molza was the subject of a contemporary biography, Francesco Patrizi's

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The Philosophy of Love, translated into English by J. W. Crayton in 2003, which revealed not only her exceptional talent as a musician, but her intellectual accomplishments, which included translating the works of Plato. (Patrizi 2003)

Filippo Fiorini was the other main character of the book inspired by historical sources. His name, and much of his character, was based on a servant in the household of Ippolito d'Este, as documented in Mary Hollingsworth's 2005 study *The Cardinal's Hat: Money, Ambition, and Everyday Life in the Court of a Borgia Prince*. Though the subtitle of Hollingsworth's book emphasised the connection of its subject with the better-known Borgia dynasty (the cardinal of the title was the son of the notorious Lucrezia Borgia, wife of Alfonso II's grandfather), Ippolito was a prominent member of the Este dynasty, a great artistic patron in Ferrara as well as Rome, and the man who was Guglielmo's earliest contact in his efforts to find castrati. One Giacomo Filippo Fiorini was Ippolito's *fattore* (agent or factor) in Ferrara, described by Hollingsworth as 'hard-working, conscientious and honest'. Hollingsworth's detailed study of the extensive Este archives in Modena revealed telling details about Fiorini's character and role, about his approach to the dull but vital task of keeping the cardinal's books, his troubled relationship with a fraudulent assistant called Tomaso Morelli (who, unlike his master, had been promoted to his post through nepotism) and the debt-driven economics that ruled life in a courtly household. (Hollingsworth 2005: 134-5, 150-1)

The third of the novel's main characters, the debt collector Giacomo Bonaccioli, was not based on any historical source. While the Florentine debt crisis and the decline of the Medici Bank in the late fifteenth century has been well documented (for example in de Roover 1947), searches for the role of debt in general and debt collectors in particular during the late Renaissance period yielded few results. The term used in the novel to refer to Bonaccioli's role, 'colletore', came from an entry in John Florio's seventeenth-century Italian dictionary. (Florio 1659) Other than that, most of the historical information relating to Bonaccioli and the wider issue of banking and debt came from studies about Jews in Renaissance Italy (see for example Bonfil 1994, Milano 1939, Ravid 1976) and the Fugger Bank. (Mentges 2002)

This, then, was the main research that laid groundwork for the novel, all of it secondary, but published in peer-reviewed journals or academic books.

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How, then, was it put to work? Margaret Atwood, commenting on her 1996 historical novel *Alias Grace*, based on a notorious nineteenth-century murder case, devised a simple rule: 'when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it', otherwise she was 'free to invent'. (Atwood 1998: 1515) Sarah Waters seemed to adopt a similar approach in her own historical fiction, though with a telling dispensation: 'I don't think novels should misrepresent history, unless it's for some obvious serious or playful purpose.' (Quoted in de Groot 2009: 9) In his survey of historical fiction, de Groot endorsed this view—indeed, seemed to regard speculative infilling as the writer's primary role, the author's 'creative wriggle room' lying in 'the gaps of history, in the spaces between knowledges, in the lack in texts, within the misunderstood codes, and it is the very insubstantiality of the past that allows them to introduce their version of events.' (de Groot 2009: 182)

I struggled with Atwood's view of a clear delineation between 'solid facts' and the 'gaps' lying between them. Professional historians, even those who hold firmly with a realist or positivist view of history, would consider such a supposition naive. In the case of sixteenth-century Italy, an early-modern culture that was still predominantly oral, names and dates can rarely be known with certainty or precision. Everything from the time of day to the value of a coin is fluid. For example, while Ferrara had an official currency (the *lire marchesana*), many others were in routine use in the city, such as the Roman *scudo di moneta* or the Venetian ducat. A variety of gold currencies, such as the Florentine florin, were used as mediums of exchange, but the rate of exchange was rarely recorded and highly variable. (See Hollingsworth 2005: xii) In a story that is about, among other things, the monetary value of people revealed through the ransoming of hostages, how should such variations be accounted for?

One particular 'fact' that had an impact on the plot of *The Angel of Ferrara* turned out to be far from solid. The fictional Tarquinia Molza in the novel is a widow working in Ferrara in 1579. According to one source, the historical Molza was widowed a decade earlier, in 1569. (Newcomb 1980) The Italian *Dictionary of National Biography* identifies the year of her husband's death as 1579 (Romanelli); Patrizi, a contemporary, indicated it was 1578. (Patrizi 2003) What year should I use, and on what basis: historical accuracy or fictional convenience? Does it even matter?

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Another difficulty with sticking to the 'solid facts' is that to view a foreign sixteenth-century city through the lens of modern fiction inevitably results in distortion. In his definitive survey of historical fiction, the Hungarian philosopher and critic György Lukács suggested the form has to acknowledge this openly by embracing what Hegel called 'necessary anachronism'. Lukács noted, for example, how Scott had relied upon anachronistic devices and effects to allow his characters 'to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done'. Indeed, it was through the 'expression of thought and feeling' in a way which outstripped 'the consciousness of the age' in which his stories are set that Scott showed his 'great poetic sensitivity'. (Lukács 1962: 63)

This creates an obvious tension with the 'solid facts', in so far as they can be known. Do they remain as factual when they are 'expressed' anachronistically?

'Words, words, words,' was Hamlet's cry (II:2). That is all a literary character, fictional, biographical or historical, is made up of—yet very few of those words are likely to come from the time and place in which they appear. Some see this as a central issue. As the novelist Adam Thorpe put it:

Refusing to use the past as mere picturesque setting, the best historical fiction doesn't so much give us a glimpse into that foreign country as let us look out from it. Language is the key. In my novel *Ulverton*, set in a village over 300 years, I used strict imitations of period language to find my way into the folds of each century. (Thorpe 2014)

Language may be the key, but the 'imitations of period language', whether 'strict' or not, can never be authentic. What little of period language survives is literary rather than oral, so if characters are to speak, there is nothing to imitate. In the case of *The Angel of Ferrara*, imitation was not even an option. The inhabitants of an early-modern Italian city like Ferrara did not speak or think in Italian, let alone English, rather a variety of vernaculars and dialects determined by where they were brought up, their social status and their occupation. (See Burke 1981)

In early drafts of the novel, an attempt was made to invent a vernacular for the Bonaccioli character, Robert Greene's dictionaries of Elizabethan 'cant' providing an English analogue of a roughly similar vintage, but, in the context of a work of realist

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fiction with a third-person narrator, it seemed to emerge as the just the kind of 'antique colouring' Eliot had deplored as 'silly'. (Greene 1591)

In the end, the best advice seemed to come from Hilary Mantel, which was typically pragmatic. 'Too much period flavor, and you slow up the story,' she argued in a 2012 article for the *Wall Street Journal*, while a neutral modern idiom would come over as 'flavorless'. 'So what to do?'

Relax, I think; accept that you will never be authentic. Recently I've been writing about the early Tudor period. We simply don't know how people conversed in that era. Our sources are mostly official: government records, legal documents. The private letters that have been preserved tend to have been kept because they were important: That is, they deal with formal matters. We simply don't know how servants talked between themselves or how the mass of illiterate men and women communicated. (Mantel 2012b)

Research, then, can help establish the environment of the novel—the manners of the characters, the setting in which they move and with which they interact, the historical forces acting upon them—but there are limits. And the idea that 'solid fact' provides anchor-points for plot, or acts as a sort of static foundation or structure upon which the fiction is built, seems inadequate if not naive—at least, that is what I discovered when it came to writing *The Angel of Ferrara*.

Often, for example, I found that it was not the research that shaped the fiction, but the fiction that shaped the research, particularly when it came to points in the story when it was hard to see how a character might react to events. Addressing these moments in a way that would be psychologically convincing and narratively coherent seemed vital to character development, but working through of the internal conditions that seemed to present themselves to a particular character at a particular time within the context of the story did not always prove productive. At such times, it was often useful to turn back to research, to hunt through available historical evidence as a detective might the scene of a crime for an as yet unidentified clue that might explain what could be going on.

An example is Filippo's response, in one of the early sections of 'Day 7' of the novel, to the discovery that a kidnapper of Tarquinia's missing child Angelo might be a man called Sancto Novellino, the cardinal's gardener and slaughterer. (p.134 ff above)

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Novellino's character was inspired by one employed by Filippo's historical namesake, Cardinal Ippolito's agent. As Hollingsworth reported, the historical Fiorini bought fifteen pigs in the market in Ferrara in the winter of 1537 which one of the household gardeners, a man named Piero, slaughtered at a price of 2 soldi 6 denari a pig. (Hollingsworth 2005: 172) This Piero became Sancto Novellino, employed by the fictional Fiorini as the cardinal's gardener-slaughterer, whose ear had been lopped for some unspecified offence.

Jacomo's report to Filippo and Tarquinia of his encounter with Angelo's kidnappers prompts the following interchange:

'Did you recognise them, these kidnappers?' [Tarquinia] asks [...]

Bonaccioli shakes his head. 'The older one had a missing ear, scarring around the side of his head.' He indicates by cupping a hand over one ear.

'Scarring? Like...a convicted coiner?' Filippo realises too late the incriminating note of alarm in his voice.

'Yes.' The colletore is alert to the sudden show of interest. 'You know him?'

Filippo pauses, wondering what to say. 'Tall?' he ventures.

Bonaccioli shakes his head. 'No, squat, like you.'

Sancto Novellino, the cardinal's gardener and slaughterer, perfectly described. (pp.120-121 above)

Having made this possible identification, the issue then arose of how Filippo would respond. If the kidnapper was indeed Novellino, that would suggest the cardinal's household was somehow involved in the kidnapping plot—for Filippo, an inconceivable conclusion, yet one Jacomo's evidence would not allow him to discount.

In early drafts, the next scene featuring Filippo concerned his attempt to interview Novellino to find out the truth. But it seemed that the cardinal's inquisitive but timid servant would not so quickly and boldly confront such a bewildering possibility (and dangerous man) without a certain amount of agonising. One way of showing this was by having him fret overnight about whether or not it could be the cardinal's employee the colletore Jacomo had described. So, where might Filippo look to find an answer? He was not the sort of person who would seek emotional support from a confidant or

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friend, or talk it through with a senior member of staff. Nor would he be happy drawing on instinct or even experience to settle the matter. He would want to deploy a more systematic, actuarial approach, the basis of most of his determinations.

So, what form would such an approach take for a rather pedantic sixteenth-century Italian accountant? How would he go about reckoning the chances that the kidnapper with the lopped ear was Novellino?

Research into the history of the mathematics of probability showed that as late as 1579, the year in which *The Angel of Ferrara* is set, they were not well known. The dice game hazard and other forms of gambling were popular in Italy during the Renaissance period (mentioned by, among others, Dante in the sixth canto of his *Purgatorio*), and habitual players must have been capable of guessing odds. But the mathematics had yet to be formalised.

In *The Angel of Ferrara*, however, Filippo has been established as something of a financial and mathematical innovator, having adopted in his working practices the relatively novel methods of Fra Luca Bartolomeo de Paccioli, who in his *Summa Arithmetica, Geometria, Proportioni et Propotritionalità*, published in 1494, set out the principles of what came to be known as double-entry bookkeeping. Paccioli provides in this work one of the earliest published descriptions for a method of calculating odds, in his case as would arise from playing a ballgame. However, in the novel, Filippo had also managed to get hold of a manuscript copy of Cardano's *Liber de Ludo Aleae* ('The Book of Games of Chance'), a rare text probably written in the 1560s but not published until 1663. (Kendall 1956)

In order to work out the odds, however, Filippo needed more than an algorithm; he needed some data, and further research disclosed a possible source—an official document of a sort known to exist in Florence at around this time, known as the 'The Book of the Condemned'.

The existence of books of this sort came to light in a 1998 paper by William J. Connell and Giles Constable entitled 'Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence'. (Constable and Connell 1998) It tells the story of one Antonio Rinaldeschi who, on 11 July, 1501, left the Fig Tree tavern in Florence having lost money and an article of

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clothing (his shirt, presumably) at the gaming table. Cursing the Virgin Mary for his misfortune, a bloodshot eye caught sight of a fresco of the Virgin Annunciate, known as the Madonna or S. Maria de' Ricci and, in a fit of fury, Rinaldeschi scooped up a handful of horse-dung, which he threw at the face of the Virgin. Perhaps in a panic at having been seen performing the act by a small boy, he fled to a villa outside the city.

What might seem a trifling example of blasphemy to modern eyes was taken very seriously by the Florentine authorities. A man-hunt tracked him down to a nearby convent, where he was arrested and taken back to the Bargello, the fortified palace of Florence's *podestá* or sheriff. There he confessed to a board of magistrates known as the 'Eight of Security' (*Otto di guardia*). Begging to be executed as he feared being lynched by a mob if he was released, he was condemned to being hanged from a window of the Borgello prison, an apparently common method of execution at the time to avoid the body being interfered with.

In sixteenth-century Florence, there was a body known as the Company of the Blacks (*Compagnia dei Neri*), a religious confraternity that would accompany the condemned after their final absolution from their cell to the place of execution. They kept a log of their activities known as the 'Book of the Condemned' (*Libro delle condanne*), which included details about the crime, and it was this source that provided the detail of Rinaldeschi's case.

It seemed reasonable to locate a company similar to the *Compagnia dei Neri* in Ferrara, as both the institution and its records were performing religious as well as bureaucratic functions that were common to both Florentine and Ferrarese cultures. This conjectural invention seemed risky, as it could be contradicted by a study of the archival sources. However, the purpose of using it was not to make a historical point about Renaissance justice in Ferrara, but to develop the fictional Fiorini's character in a way that was consistent to his individuality as well as his milieu. The scholarly information provided by Connell's and Constable's paper showed that Filippo could have had access to information that, combined with what was known about probability, would provide the sort of data-driven assessment Filippo would crave.

There are other instances of research being used in this way (for example, Tarquinia Molza's refusal to use makeup or to soap her hair). In these cases at least, the research

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was used in a way at odds with the usual peritextual justifications for drawing on historical research: it was not there to provide fixed points between which the fiction acts as filling, to authenticate the story or ensure historical consistency. It was there to provide a way of exposing dimensions of the fictional (rather than historical) character that might otherwise remain hidden.

§

In her review of Mantel's *Wolf Hall* for the *New Yorker* magazine, Joan Acocella observed that the work 'is a novel, not a history book. We have no reason, without external evidence, to believe that any of it is true—though Mantel makes us want to believe.' ('Tudor Tales', *New Yorker*, 19 October, 2009) However, whatever the truth of the book's depiction of historical people and events, there is little question that Mantel undertook extensive and systematic research. So how did that research shape the result? Mantel's sparse peritexts give few clues, though hints have emerged in an epitextual corpus that has grown along with the exceptional popular and critical success of her work.

The foundation of her entire characterisation of Thomas Cromwell, the indomitable central character of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*, is his brutal and humble upbringing. The book's opening image is of the boy Cromwell sprawled across the ground having been felled by his abusive father, a Putney butcher and brewer. (Mantel 2009: 3) Time and again, Thomas is reminded of his humble origins, particularly by the Boleyns, who have their own social insecurities to deal with. 'Butcher's dog,' Sir Thomas Boleyn is reduced to whispering in contempt, after being humiliated in front of Cromwell by Cardinal Wolsey. (70) Mary, Anne's sister, says her brother George described him as being 'born in the gutter'. (111)

The evidence supports this foundation. As for many in this era from humble origins, the date of Thomas Cromwell's birth is unknown—a lacuna which Mantel cunningly uses in an early scene where the young Cromwell returns to Wolsey after a trip to Yorkshire, the cardinal being amused when it emerges his emissary does not know his own age. (24) However, it is known from one contemporary that he was a 'ruffian [...] in his young days' and court records reveal that his father was fined on nearly fifty

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occasions for sharp business practices, convicted of assault and evicted from his tenancy for tampering with official documents. (Leithead 2004)

Impressive levels of historical authority and erudition are demonstrated throughout Mantel's Tudor novels. For example, in the run-up to Anne Boleyn's coronation, Cromwell inspects the rooms being prepared for her at the Tower of London:

[Cromwell] orders in braziers to help dry out the plaster. He wants to get on with the frescoes—he wishes Hans would come down, but he is painting de Dinteville and says he needs to push on with it, as the ambassador is petitioning Francis [I, King of France] for his recall, a whining letter on every boat. (448)

Tudor historians and aficionados will know the 'Hans' to be Hans Holbein, and the painting that detains him from Cromwell's service to be 'The Ambassadors', the portrait of Jean de Dinteville, French ambassador to England in 1533, and Georges de Selve, bishop of Lavaur, with the distorted image of a skull in the foreground. It is a tiny detail, but its presence demonstrates to those who wish for reassurance that she has done her work.

Exploiting Byron's dictum about the truth being stranger than fiction, she also has a habit of inserting historical details that are so incongruous, so confounding of modern expectations and assumptions about the past, that it is hard not to read them as authentic. An example from *Bring up the Bodies*, her sequel to *Wolf Hall*, concerns fashion:

This season young men carry their effects in soft pale leather bags, in imitation of the agents for the Fugger bank, who travel all over Europe and set the fashion. The bags are heart-shaped and so to him it always looks as if they are going wooing, but they swear they are not. Nephew Richard Cromwell sits down and gives the bags a sardonic glance. (Mantel 2012a: 52)

'Do you know,' asked a startled James Wood in his *New Yorker* review of the novel, 'if Mantel has manufactured or borrowed from the record this information about the fashionable Fugger bag?' (James Wood 2012)

It seems she had borrowed. The Fugger Bank (which features in *The Angel of Ferrara*) was a powerful German finance house of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries based in Augsburg. One of its employees was Matthäus Schwarz (1496-1564), who was not only a prominent and successful bookkeeper, but unusually flamboyant and extravagant in

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'matters of attire'. He was so keen to show off his wardrobe that he commissioned an illustrated autobiography depicting himself at stages of his life wearing a variety of costumes. It is one of the illustrations in this eccentric production that shows him aged '27 years 19 weeks 1 day old' sporting a heart-shaped purse hanging from his belt, which Mantel perhaps came across while researching contemporary costume. (Mentges 2002: figure 3)

She is also alive to issues of historical speculation or controversy and ingeniously weaves them into the narrative. For example, Cromwell, planning to approach the father of Anne Boleyn about Henry's interest in her, wonders how Sir Thomas will react given the 'old rumour' that the king had cuckolded him. (Mantel 2009: 70) Just such a rumour is reported in the record, but whether or not it was true remains unknown, and Mantel leaves it to her readers to decide for themselves.

Besides these eclectic and speculative flourishes, however, Mantel's research appears to draw on mostly conventional and familiar secondary sources: Roger Bigelow Merriman's *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell* (1902), George Cavendish's *Thomas Wolsey, Late Cardinall, his Lyffe and Deathe* (the only work she mentions in a brief Author's Note), perhaps a more modern biography such as G. R. Elton's *Reform and Renewal* (1973), along with familiar stalwarts of Tudor and Stuart research, such as John Stowe's *Survey of London*.

Her method, then, for producing what is generally agreed to be a startlingly vivid work does not come from discovering primary sources that challenge the existing historical record. Instead, it comes from putting already familiar sources to a particularly productive fictive use, which is to serve the development of Cromwell as a compelling fictional character.

For example, Merriman tells the story of Cromwell sending his son Gregory, along with his cousin called Christopher Wellyfed, to Cambridge where a John Chekyng was to act as their tutor. A dispute arose with the tutor concerning his bills, prompting Cromwell to 'taunt', as Merriman put it, Chekyng on his educational failings. The 'honest' Chekyng protested to Cromwell that he had brought up six MAs and fellows of the university, and demanded reparations for the damage Christopher had done when he 'dyd hynge a candel in a playt to loyk apone hys boyk and so fell ascleype and the

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candell fell into the bed strawe,' burning the bed, bolster and linen. (Merriman 1902: 54)

Where Merriman saw taunts on the one hand, and honesty on the other, Mantel demonstrates her almost protective engagement with her character by retelling the story from Cromwell's perspective:

Autumn comes. Gregory goes back to his tutor; his reluctance is clear enough, though little about Gregory is clear to him. 'What is it,' he asks him, 'what's wrong?' The boy won't say [...]. He regrets the choice of tutor he's made for his son and nephews, but he won't take them away at this point. The man is quarrelsome, and to be sure there was a sad episode when one of the boys set fire to his room, because he'd been reading in bed with a candle. 'It wouldn't be Gregory, would it?' he'd said, always hopeful; the master seemed to think he was treating it as a joke. And he's always sending him bills that he believes he's paid; I need a household accountant, he thinks. (Mantel 2009: 132)

There are details in this episode that seem to be at odds with what is suggested by the historical record, in particular the query 'It wouldn't be Gregory, would it?', since the information was received in a letter which included the careless scholar's identity. But the aside is needed to fulfil one of the episode's purposes, which is to throw more light on Cromwell's feelings—veering between disappointment, exasperation and touching affection—for his dimwitted son (his only surviving child, his two daughters disappearing from the historical record while they were in childhood, and in the novel dying of the plague).

A similar kind of purpose is at work when she writes of Cromwell's promotion to Master of the Rolls in 1534. He takes up residence in the master's official residence in Chancery Lane, described thus by Stow:

And then nexte was sometime the house of the conuerted lewes, founded by king Henry the third, in place of a lewes house to him forfeited, in the yeare 1233. and the 17. of his raigne, who builded there for them a faire Church now vsed, and called the Chappell for the custodie of Rolles and Records of Chancerie. It standeth not farre from the old Temple, but in the midway betweene the olde Temple and the new. (Stow 1603: 395-6)

In Mantel's hands, this stark description becomes a way of opening up a new stage in Cromwell's career, as well as adding vivacity to the character of Christophe, a fugitive from French justice he adopts as a servant:

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The Master's house in Chancery Lane is the most curious house he has ever entered. It smells of must, mould and tallow, and behind its crooked facade it meanders back, a warren of little spaces with low doorways; were our forebears all dwarves, or were they not perfectly certain how to prop up a ceiling?

This house was founded three hundred years ago, by the Henry that was then; he built it as a refuge for Jews who wished to convert. If they took this step—advisable if they wished to be preserved from violence—they would forfeit all their possession to the Crown. This being so, it was just that the Crown should house and feed them for their natural lives.

Christophe runs ahead of him, into the depths of the house. 'Look!' He trails a finger through a vast spider's web.

'You've broken up her home, you heartless boy.' He examines Ariane's crumbling prey: a leg, a wing. 'Let's be gone, before she comes back.' (Mantel 2009: 581)

There must have been few houses in Tudor London that did not smell of must, mould and tallow, that had facades that were perpendicular or interiors that were orderly. Nevertheless, in Mantel's hands, the description amounts to more than 'antique colouring', as it manifestly serves a role in the development of character and story. There is a sense of the oppressive weight of the past in the decrepit state of the house, and a suggestion of an opportunity for renewal. The observation about Henry using the house as a 'refuge' for Jews, and the justness of housing and feeding them, casts a little more light on Cromwell's principled as well as pragmatic view of justice. And in the apparently light-hearted vignette with the spider's web, an image is provided of Cromwell's deepening and dangerous involvement in the 'Great Matter' of the king's divorce, which threatened to break up not only of the royal household but the kingdom.

Mantel's ability to turn history into fiction seems to be so fluent, so seamless, she arouses concern, even suspicion in some critics, as though being capable of such a subtle transition between the two suggests a dangerous ability to manipulate. James Wood described *Wolf Hall* as 'mysteriously successful' for a work in such a 'gimcrack genre' as historical fiction. Mantel proceeds 'as if authenticity were magic rather than a science'. 'She knows that what gives fiction its vitality is not the accurate detail but

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the animate one. In effect, she proceeds as if the past five hundred years were a relatively trivial interval in the annals of human emotion.' (James Wood 2012)

Stephen Greenblatt, who, as a historicist critic of Renaissance literature, knows the era she is writing about, came to a strikingly similar conclusion, describing her success as 'an act of conjuring'. Nevertheless, he appears not to have fallen for the trick. 'Cromwell's actual life story is, in its way, a sombrely fascinating one,' he notes. 'But it is not the story that Hilary Mantel has chosen to relate.' (Greenblatt 2009)

Such unease reflects the consequences of Mantel's success. For there is something historical as well as literary at stake here: Cromwell's reputation, which in Mantel's hands has started to undergo a profound revision.

Mantel made her name rehabilitating despised historical figures. She did so in her first novel, *A Place of Greater Safety*, which offered a sympathetic portrait of Robespierre. Cromwell has conventionally been similarly reviled. His contemporary Cardinal Reginald Pole (1500-1558) set the tone by describing him as having 'an aptitude for ruin and destruction,' a description by no means at odds with Holbein's shrewd portrait. (Martin Haile 1911) Though his reputation would rise and fall over succeeding centuries, the consensus would usually settle towards the negative, particularly in the nineteenth century, when he was seen as acting not out of theological conviction but political opportunism when it came to Henry's 'Great Matter'. 'Perhaps of all the mean and dastardly wretches that ever died, this was the most mean and dastardly,' William Cobbett concluded. (Quoted in Leithead 2004)

Merriman's influential 1902 biography helped cement his reputation as an unscrupulous schemer:

He obviously had remarkable power of quickly adapting himself to his surroundings. He rarely failed to realize immediately his relation to those with whom he came in contact, and his manner, behaviour, and expression varied accordingly. No one knew better how or when to flatter than Thomas Cromwell; on the other hand no one could be more harsh and cruel than he, when he was in a position to dictate. (Merriman 1902: 85)

It was a view that carried into another highly successful and influential work of Tudor historical fiction, Robert Bolt's 1960 play and 1966 Oscar-winning film *A Man for All Seasons*, about Cromwell's enemy Sir Thomas More. The script's dramatis personae

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describes Cromwell as displaying 'a self-conceit that can cradle gross crimes in the name of effective action', whereas More's face 'is intellectual and quickly delighted, the norm to which it returns serious and compassionate'. (Bolt 2013)

In order to produce her more sympathetic portrait of Cromwell as a family man and a principled as well as pragmatic politician, Mantel had to make adjustments. In the case of More, this meant the figure of intellectual integrity and religious piety depicted in Bolt's play being transformed into a cruel and sanctimonious zealot:

The word is that the Lord Chancellor has become a master in the twin arts of stretching and compressing the servants of God. When heretics are taken, he stands by at the Tower while the torture is applied. It is reported that in his gatehouse at Chelsea he keeps suspects in the stocks, while he preaches at them and harries them: the name of your printer, the name of the master of the ship that brought these books into England. They say he uses the whip, the manacles and the torment-frame they call Skeffington's Daughter. It is a portable device, into which a man is folded, knees to chest, with a hoop of iron across his back; by means of a screw, the hoop is tightened until his ribs crack. It takes art to make sure the man does not suffocate: for if he does, everything he knows is lost. (Mantel 2009: 298)

The reference to 'Skeffington's Daughter', an instrument that survived in the Tower's collection of torture instruments, is a lurid presence in Foxe's martyrology, (Nichols 1859: 189) and, as always with Mantel, its presence here is not as a museum piece but to reveal character. Arguably, it might show a certain professional interest on Cromwell's part in the technology of torture, and even a certain respect for More's artistry in its deployment. The main aim, however, is obvious, which is to demonstrate More's barbarity, and the fanatical ends it serves:

More says it does not matter if you lie to heretics, or trick them into a confession. They have no right to silence, even if they know speech will incriminate them; if they will not speak, then break their fingers, burn them with irons, hang them up by their wrists. It is legitimate, and indeed More goes further; it is blessed. (Mantel 2009: 361)

And the denigration of More is unrelenting. Every time he is mentioned, some character defect is emphasized, particularly in relation to marriage, which is contrasted with the widower Cromwell's uxoriousness: 'When More's first wife died, her successor was in the house before the corpse was cold'; (122) '...as for wives, they are two-a-penny with Thomas More.' (280)

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This, it may be argued, reflects Cromwell's view of More, which was known to be antagonistic. The use of phrases such as 'The word is that...' or 'they say' before some contentious remark about More's behaviour reinforces this interpretation, as does the book's distinctive narrative voice—third person but tightly focalised around the subject of Cromwell. Nevertheless, from the words the third-person narration puts in More's mouth and the behaviour observed in particular towards his family, there can be little doubt that Mantel's More is far from the compassionate intellectual depicted by Bolt.

But the (perhaps justifiable and certainly refreshing) disparagement of More is not enough. Other characters must change too, even King Henry. Mantel's monarch is not a fickle tyrant, nor a proud prince so much as a loving, lively but reckless child with appetites over which regal omnipotence and courtly obsequiousness give him no opportunity for control: 'He likes giving; like a child, he enjoys anticipating how pleased you will be.' (443) It helps make Cromwell's solicitous care of the king seem sincere, rather than self-interested, almost heroic, rather than fawning.

As a result of these adjustments, some critics, particularly those with a background in history, have found Mantel's fictional characters at odds with what is known about their historical counterparts. In her recent study of popular fictional portrayals of Anne Boleyn, for example, Susan Bordo was disappointed that Mantel's Boleyn 'follows the old stereotype of Anne as a scheming predator'. (Bordo 2013: 235) Bordo points out how, through Cromwell, Boleyn is seen as a 'calculating being with a cold slick brain'. (Mantel 2009: 350) Boleyn's eyes are shiny 'like the beads of an abacus...always in motion'; her teeth are 'white and sharp'. (387) While accepting that Mantel's characterisation is subtle and sophisticated, Bordo points out that 'her choices of what to include and what to eliminate from the historical record suggest that she (and not merely Cromwell) is intent on building a case against Anne.' (Bordo 2013: 237)

Bemused by the discovery of 'the old, one-sided, extremist view of Anne' in a work that offers 'such as textured, unsettlingly "real" re-creation of Henry's court', Bordo speculates that this has something to do with Mantel reproducing 'our "default" Anne, who insinuates herself in the imagination whenever we aren't specifically focused on rehabilitating her.' (Ibid.)

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Another interpretation of Mantel's motives is that it suited her wider fictional scheme, and its unwavering focus on Cromwell. Having chosen to portray him as a faithful, family-loving servant of power, an abused and vulnerable child who fought his way to prominence using guile when he did not need to resort to fists, it makes sense in her fictional representation of the Henrician court that those who challenge him in some way will be deserving of their fate.

Some might argue this results in a Cromwell as credible as any historical one. A figure who has beguiled biographers and historians for half a millennium, whose motives and actions have conventionally been explained as the product of a moral or psychological pathology, has come vividly and convincingly to life. Perhaps this shows that, sometimes, narrative logic and emotional acuity can yield an understanding of a person and a period that the arts of historical research and interpretation cannot.

Alternatively, Mantel's method could be seen as evidence of how, once it has passed through a fictionalising process, history becomes entirely another thing: the objective record becomes a subjective (Mantel's or her fictional Cromwell's) perception; historical truth yields to narrative logic, cause and effect to motive and agency.

§

Did I see it coming, the storm of righteous indignation which, more than twenty years ago, broke over my little black book? No, I didn't—at least not that a modest, playful piece of self-evident fiction would be regarded by the sentinels of the academy as a betrayal of History; an outrage against the profession and its code of conduct; a manifesto of ultra-relativism; the Enemy against whom a Stand Had to be Taken. (Schama 2013 Preface)

Schama's 'little black book' was *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Expectations)*, his historical fiction first published in 1991, an idiosyncratic novel which tells two stories: one about the death of General Wolfe at the battle of Quebec in 1759, the other the 1849 murder in Boston of George Parkman. The offending 'sentinels of the academy' were in truth not that numerous, the book receiving generally positive reviews. However, a few took exception to an important and respected historian entering the field of fiction. There were concerns that his imprimatur would continue a trend of confounding fact and fiction that threatened the very notion of history as an objective study of the past.

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Leading the assault was Gordon Wood, a Pulitzer Prize-winner and professor of history at Brown University. 'It was bound to happen,' he lamented in his review of Schama's book for the *New York Review of Books*. 'Sooner or later a distinguished historian had to cross over, had to mingle the writing of fiction with the writing of history.' (Gordon S Wood 1991)

Wood acknowledges that *Dead Certainties* is a 'tour de force of storytelling', and accepts that Schama identifies it as a work of fiction. 'Though these stories may at times appear to observe the discursive conventions of history,' Schama states in an Author's Note to *Dead Certainties*, 'they are in fact historical novellas.' However, Wood detected that there was more to it than that. Schama followed his disclaimer about the work being purely fictional with an outburst of hedging. While he did not 'scorn the boundary between fact and fiction,' he noted that 'the most scholarly report from the archives' necessarily involves 'selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgments'. He did not hold 'a naïvely relativist position that insists that the lived past is *nothing* more than an artificially designed text' yet accepted 'historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator'. (Schama 1991: 322) It was perhaps the adverb 'fatally' that was fatal as far as Wood was concerned. 'Schama cannot have it both ways,' he complained. 'He cannot write fiction and still assume that it will have the authenticity and credibility of history.' Furthermore, 'the loss of credibility' resulting from the mixing of fact and fiction 'far outweighs any aesthetic gains that Schama might have gotten from his narrative experiment. Indeed, his violation of the conventions of history writing actually puts the integrity of the discipline of history at risk.' (Gordon S Wood 1991)

The late A. J. Sherman, an Oxford historian as well as a pseudonymous author of thrillers, was equally anxious, even contemptuous, of Schama's experiment. Writing almost in despair of the 'reigning orthodoxy among many university faculties' of postmodernism, he accused Schama of helping 'erode the idea of objective truth' and of contributing, 'however unwittingly, to our vast contemporary confusion [...] about where the verifiable ends and show business begins'. *Dead Certainties* took a 'blithe approach to historical writing,' he argued, 'which teeters on the brink of infotainment,

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lies in that border area perhaps more appropriate to Norman Mailer or Truman Capote, and seems fraught with problems for serious historians'. (Sherman 2005)

In a preface to a 2013 edition of the novel, Schama took on his critics in his characteristically forthright way, detecting a political motive in the attacks—in particular a backlash among right-wing historians who had mistaken him for a 'reincarnation of Edmund Burke' after reading his 1989 historical work on the French Revolution *Citizens*. Accusing him, as he saw it, of selling out 'History' for 'some sort of specious and obscure game', his response was, 'Keep your hair on, it's fiction, two novellas about history, not history itself.'

I couldn't quite bring myself to believe that anyone could be so obtuse as to imagine a book which began in the voice of a common soldier, "Twas the darkness that did the trick,' could be anything else. And anyone reading the afterword, which plainly declared the credentials of the book as fiction, couldn't possibly be left in any doubt.

Attention had been drawn, he noted, to his use of historical sources, but while 'the inclusion of documents gives the stories a matrix of reality, it does not, of course, make the stories any less fictitious'.

And yet, he was once again unable to resist creeping back into 'epistemological debates'. He cited approvingly the philosopher R. G. Collingwood's formulation that historical enquiry involved an element of 'imaginative re-enactment', though added that *Dead Certainties* 'was never intended to be any sort of formal "intervention" in that debate'. Nevertheless, an interest in General James Wolfe's death at the Battle of Quebec as 'perhaps the great heroic *exemplum virtutis* of the British Empire', initially developed as part of an undergraduate course, brought him to Benjamin West's famous painting, *The Death of General Wolfe* and a rediscovery of the historical romanticism of Francis Parkman's nineteenth-century account of the episode in his *Montcalm and Wolfe*. 'If ever there was a case of Collingwood's "imaginative re-enactment", this was it.' (Schama 2013 Preface)

'I do in fact believe in the ways contingency can circumscribe simply positivist versions of reconstructing past events,' Schama eventually conceded, but did not see his 'little pair of fictions' as demarcating that circumscription. Nevertheless, his experience showed that, from the perspective of some historians at least, historical fiction is

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something that it is dangerous to confuse with history—entangling the one, it seems, will do lasting damage to the other.

Fictional History

Stories are not lived; there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions. (Hayden White 2010: xxv)

Savage Kingdom, my history of England's efforts in the early 1600s to colonise the area around the Chesapeake Bay, was subject to some peritextual controversy before its publication in America. The New York publishers were uneasy about the title. Though it was meant ironically (the 'kingdom' being England, where political infighting led to a huge number of casualties among the early colonists, and policies on the treatment of the native Americans varied from exploitative to murderous), it was felt to be sensationalist and prone to misinterpretation. There were also concerns over the subtitle. For UK edition, it was 'Virginia & the founding of English America'. The American publishers preferred a more verbose but explicit alternative: 'The True Story of Jamestown, 1607, and the Settlement of America'. (Woolley 2008) My concern with the American version was the word 'true', which seemed presumptuous. The publishers' reasoning was that the book's title, cover art and a perusal of the opening pages might confuse readers into thinking it was a historical novel, and the word 'true' signalled otherwise.

So how 'true' was it? It was certainly not supposed to be false, nor fiction. But there were areas, in particular relating to the Indians, where notions of truth were problematic, and, to deal with them, it struck me that methods not usually associated with the conventions of strict history were required.*

The history and ethnography of the Virginia Indians is almost totally dependent on the colonisers. The Indians had no written culture, and, living in a realm almost devoid of stone and rock, a littoral in which nearly all construction was of wood, leather or plant-based fibres, the only fragments of their material culture that has survived are bones, beads, shells and outlines in the soil. Their language is extinct, except for the scraps

* The term 'Indian' was adopted in *Savage Kingdom* to denote the native population, as, at the time of writing the book, that was the term used by ethnographers and locally by those claiming native descent.

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recorded by the colonists. As Thomas Jefferson pointed out in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in little more than a century, most of the tribes had been diminished to a few remnants, many, he observed, with 'more negro than Indian blood in them', anticipating the later practice in Virginia of treating the two ethnic groups as one. (Jefferson 1787: 154ff)

The conventional, positivistic approach to writing a history of such a poorly-documented population would be to undertake a careful inspection of the sources that survive (in the case of the Indians, the works of three colonists: Henry Spelman, William Strachey and Captain John Smith), using interpretative skills such as close reading and cross-referencing to correct for the distorting effects of the texts' political and rhetorical functions.

Helen Rountree, one of the most prominent historians of the Virginia Indians, adopted this approach. She wrote, for example, about one of the most perplexing aspects of Indian behaviour for the English colonists, concerning the use of place and personal names. Even the name of the region the English were colonising was unclear to them. They took it to be 'Powhatan', the name of the paramount leader, who in turn seemed to be named after the town of his birth (though perhaps the town was named after him). Strachey, however, called it Tsenacomoco, which has some philological backing (it could be derived from the Algonquian term for 'densely inhabited land'), but, curiously, neither Smith nor Spelman, who had closer and longer contact with the Indians, mentioned the term. (See discussion in Woolley 2008: 415, note 5)

When it came to personal names, the position was, for the English, even more perplexing. Rountree, writing about Virginian Indian conceptions of 'manliness', asserted that 'Powhatan personal names had meanings that everyone could understand'. Male babies were publicly named at a feast held within a few days of birth, and received more names as they grew up. 'A great exploit in war brought a man a new name, bestowed by his *weroance* [commander],' she wrote. This account of the rituals and role of naming relied almost entirely on Strachey. Smith makes only one reference to naming conventions in his copious writings, where he notes only that 'men, women, and children have their severall names according to the severall humor of their Parents'. (Smith 1624: 31) Spelman supplies the details on naming rituals to

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which Rountree refers, though he does not specify it as relating just to boys. Is this, therefore, enough to be able to say anything positive and definitive on the use of names?

A similar issue arises when it comes to understanding the Indians' religion. Strachey, for example, apparently quotes Spelman when referring to a 'Great Hare' called Ahone as a supreme Indian god. Smith makes no mention of this deity, nor does Spelman in the published version of his history. The only other possible reference to this god is in the testimony of an Indian chief, though that account is garbled. (See E W Haile 1998: 880ff)

In writing *Savage Kingdom*, I felt a way was needed to deal with writing about the Indians that did not rely on this positivistic approach, because it seemed to me to lead either to assertions that could not be sustained, or sterile and ultimately futile debates about what was known.

In his *Defence of Poesy*, Philip Sidney wrote that 'neither philosopher nor historiographer could, at the first, have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great disport of poetry'. (Sidney 1595: B3r) Poetry (by which he meant 'a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture' (Cv)) preceded philosophy and history, and the evidence for this could be seen in the practices of 'nations [...] where learning flourisheth not'. He gave an instance:

Even among the most barbarous and simple Indians, where no writing is, yet have they their Poets, who make and sing songs, which they call 'Areytos', both of their ancestor's deeds and praises of their gods. (B3r)

This quote (minus the reference to 'Areytos', a term Sidney apparently got from Peter Martyr's accounts of Indian culture garnered from Spanish colonists (Cawley 1924)) became the epigram for a chapter in *Savage Kingdom* entitled 'Tsnacomoco'. My aim was to explore a history of the Indians with an 'areytos' created out of the fragmented accounts of Indian religion, geography and cosmology contained in the colonial sources, designed to give a 'hint', as I put it, 'of what the Tsenacomoco world was like, at least as seen from the perspective of an English Otasantassuwak or "wearer of leg-coverings" about to step in and destroy it.' (Woolley 2008: 50)

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The episode for which the Jamestown venture is probably best known presented similar issues when it came to sources and suggested a similarly unorthodox solution.

Captain John Smith, one of the colonial leaders, was captured by the Indians while exploring one of the many rivers feeding into the Chesapeake Bay, and, so the story went, was saved from having his brains bashed out at the command of the supreme leader Powhatan by the intervention of his daughter Pocahontas, who laid her head upon Smith's.

Smith presents a problem for any history of the Jamestown colony. He dominates the historical record as he does the venture. Much of the documentation relating to his time in Virginia is lost, notably the records of the Virginia Company in London, which financed and managed the colonial enterprise. Having been one of the colony's first movers and governors, he was badly injured in 1609 by a gunpowder accident while on an expedition up the James River, forcing his return to England. The hyperactive 'captain' (an honorific that he insisted upon throughout his publishing career) poured his frustrated energies into producing a series of books, culminating with his *Generall Historie of Virginia*, first published in 1624. (Smith 1624) It was this work that told the vivid and captivating story of his encounter with Pocahontas.

A few other texts relate his capture by the Indians, but do not mention the Pocahontas incident. One is known as the 'True Relation'. It was based on a letter Smith sent back from Jamestown, an edited version of which the Virginia Company, for its own commercial purposes, published in 1608 under the title *A true relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia*, wrongly attributed to one Thomas Watson. (Smith 1608) Other tellings of the capture appeared in another of Smith's works known as the 'Proceedings', appended to his 1612 *Map of Virginia* and in Samuel Purchas's monumental 1613 survey of English colonial ambitions, *Purchas his Pilgrimages*. (Smith 1612, Purchas 1613)

The problem for the historian is that Smith is the only source of all these accounts— independent corroboration that he was even captured by the Indians relies on Edward Maria Wingfield, the first president of the colonial council in Jamestown, who was deposed and confined to his quarters at the time. And Smith is by no means a reliable narrator. In his autobiography, for example, he wrote of himself as having come from

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'poor beginnings', which aroused the scorn of his enemies and explained many of the slights and turmoils he suffered in later life. However, while modest, his 'beginnings' were not that 'poor', his father being a successful smallholder who enjoyed some degree of aristocratic patronage. He also claimed his parents died when he was thirteen leaving him 'a competent means, which he [i.e. Smith] not being capable to manage, little regarded'. But archival evidence suggests his parents were alive when he was thirteen, his father dying when he was sixteen, his mother going on to remarry and dying some time later. (Smith 1986; Barbour 1964) These inconsistencies demonstrate a need to approach Smith's writing with caution.

More troubling is that the Pocahontas story echoes an earlier adventure that Smith relates of being captured by Tartars and sold into slavery in Istanbul, where a young, high-ranking girl 'took (as it seemed) much compassion on him', and engineered his escape. (Barbour 1964: 58-9)

Attempts have been made to assess whether or not Pocahontas saved Smith by drawing on ethnographic evidence. Helen Rountree, for example, examined various accounts of rituals performed by 'Woodland Indians' to reach what she claimed to be the 'logical conclusion' that the story was a fabrication—but drawing such a specific conclusion from the ethnography of other Indian communities who lived along North America's Eastern seaboard around that time hardly counts as 'logical'. (Rountree 2006: 79-82)

An alternative approach was to see Smith's story for what it was, a story, and present it as such. The colonial era helped establish a new form of narrative writing in Europe, what could loosely be called the traveller's tales. The genre was so successful and pervasive, it helped, as Catherine Gallagher argues, give birth to the 'unique and paradoxical' discourse of narrative fictionality—when the convincing portrayal of imaginary characters and events slowly tipped from being seen as a type of deception to being embraced as a form of expression. (Gallagher 2006: 337) When Daniel Defoe, for example, published *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, he tried to pass it off as a true tale—an account of the 'Life and strange surprising adventures' of a real seaman, 'Written by himself and deliver'd to a Friend'. (Defoe 1719: title page) It was similar in style to any number of stories that appeared in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of

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them collected in the works of Purchas and Richard Hakluyt. A year after its publication, in response to 'some Objections' that the 'Story is feign'd, that the Names are borrow'd, and that it is all a Romance', Defoe insisted that, 'though Allegorical' the story was 'historical', because there was a 'Man alive, and well known too, the Actions of whose Life are the just Subject of these Volumes'. That man is usually taken to have been Alexander Selkirk, the Scottish sailor marooned on an island in the South Pacific in 1704. Citing what is arguably the prototype of the modern novel, he compared his story of Crusoe to 'the famous History of Don Quixote...an emblematic History of, and a just Satyr upon the Duke de Medina Sedonia'. (Defoe 1720: A2v-A3)

In *Savage Kingdom*, I decided to reflect the difficulties that surround establishing the historical truth of Smith's story of his encounter with Pocahontas by telling it in a way similar to Defoe, as a story that could be read as 'allegorical' as well as (or, if not) 'historical', that might be 'emblematic' but also a 'Satyr'. Reflecting the literary and rhetorical conventions of the genre, it was given a prolix title 'Captain Smith's Relation of his being Taken Prisoner by the Indians, how they Conjured Him, Powhatan entertained Him, would have slain him, and how his daughter saved his life'. The account that followed, drawing on Smith's own writings and those associated with him, was distinguished typographically as well as linguistically and stylistically from the rest of the text, endnotes indicating divergences from and between the various sources. (Woolley 2008: 121-133)

The switch of discourses in a work billed as a 'true story' provoked some hostile critical scrutiny. J. Frederick Fausz, a professor of ethnohistory, reviewing *Savage Kingdom* for the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, described the title as 'eye-catching but flawed'. It exacerbated what Fausz saw as the book's main problem, which was that, while adding 'important new details about the English side of the Jamestown venture', it betrayed an 'enthusiasm for storytelling' which sometimes led 'into the realm of fantasy', the areytos concerning Indian history being an example, which Fausz characterised as giving 'speaking parts to Powhatan [i.e. Indian] gods'. He saw the way Captain Smith's story about Pocahontas was told as a 'cobbling together' of a 'misleading "Relation" from three different books', which for him 'confirms the traditional story that Pocahontas saved John Smith'. (Fausz 2007: 578)

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Similar criticisms were made in a review of the book in the *Washington Post*. While accepting evidence of 'prodigious research', the reviewer felt attempts had been made to 'improve on it [...] by papering over historical questions'. For example, it 'blends Smith's various accounts to give us the legendary tale [of Smith being saved by Pocahontas], as if told by the captain around a campfire. He doesn't disclose this cut-and-paste job, except in an oblique footnote.' (Horwitz 2007)

Such reactions, echoing those directed at Schama in the context of a work of fiction, express the deep cultural anxiety among some historians about experimenting with what might be called a syncretic discourse that mixes fictional techniques with nonfiction. 'We historians are firmly bound by the authority of our sources (and by no other authority, human or divine), nor must we use fiction to fill in the gaps,' pronounced the Tudor historian Geoffrey Elton in a series of lectures given at the University of Michigan in 1990 and published under the title *Return to Essentials*. 'The historian is not allowed to invent convenient detail to make a convincing story.' (Elton 2002: 49, 62)

'Filling in the gaps,' the manifesto of so many historical novelists and anathema to historians such as Elton, is an image that assumes discrete points of certainty in a dark chasm of ignorance; there is no penumbra of doubt, no gradation of certainty. To use a scientific analogy, it assumes historical reality to be a Newtonian system rather than a quantum field. But in the case of writing about communities like the Virginia Indians, who essentially only exist only in the texts of their colonisers, this simply is not the case. There are few if any fixed points from which to triangulate, no objective facts upon which we can rely.

Elton is also assuming that fiction is only about invention, but clearly, as it has evolved over the centuries since the time of Captain John Smith and Daniel Defoe, there is more to it than that. There are techniques and effects—narrative, rhetorical, metaphorical, structural, philological, psychological—which the fiction writer has found useful to creating meaning and expose truths using material that is found as well as invented. What I was trying to do in *Savage Kingdom* was to use some of these to explore historical knowledge, in a possibly futile effort to discover the promised 'true story' so rashly included in the book's subtitle.

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Here, I believe, is where the tension between history and fiction lies—the ‘true story’. ‘Telling stories’ is, after all, the accusation adults make against children who tell lies.

§

In 1993, Luise White and Barbara Hanawalt, respectively an African and medieval historian, reviewed Schama’s *Dead Certainties* for the *American Historical Review*. The article took an unorthodox approach, the two deciding upon a ‘dialogue’. Referring to themselves in the third person, they did this as ‘they have both experimented with ways of presenting unusual evidence and agonized about whether or not the stories they tell represent historical realities’. (Hanawalt and White 1993)

Hanawalt had that year published a work entitled *Growing Up in the Middle Ages* which used stories ‘to give life to disparate archival gleanings’. These stories were based on ‘real people who appeared in the records, but [...] were fleshed out with other evidence, creating a composite of experience’. In a series of articles, White had used oral testimony to explore so-called vampire stories in colonial and modern Africa, which appeared together in her 2000 book *Speaking with Vampires*. Both Hanawalt and White were ‘keenly interested’ from a historian’s point of view ‘in how to tell a story’ while remaining sensitive ‘to the problems of writing histories into which one places dialogues, motives, and premeditated actions’.

These are the questions they posed themselves:

How much leeway does the historian have in filling in the missing evidence to tell a coherent story? What are the risks of allowing the historian's voice to intrude even more in the interpretation, if part of the story is made up? Because so much of writing history is interpretation in any case, Hanawalt and White believe that historians should boldly move beyond current conventions of historical expository writing and explore all avenues for presenting the story. (Hanawalt and White 1993: 121)

Speaking with Vampires is an example of such boldness, focussing less on how historians themselves construct stories than how they should deal with the stories they encounter in the oral and written historical record. The book begins by relating what came to be known as the ‘Mombasa incident’ of 1947. That year, rumours spread through the Kenyan city that the fire brigade had abducted a sleeping woman with the intention of taking her blood. A letter from a local colonial commissioner back to

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England described this 'yarn', as he called it, and how it had run 'round rapidly and aroused a great deal of excitement', culminating in a riot that police only managed to quell once reinforcements had been brought in. (White 2000: 3)

This was one of a number of such 'yarns' Luise White uncovered while working in Nairobi in the mid-1970s, in Siaya District in western Kenya in 1986, and in and around Kampala in 1990. She dubbed them 'vampire' stories, as they all involved an element of bloodsucking by an alien figure, usually a representative or agent of the authorities in colonial Africa, including the police and game rangers as well as members of the fire brigade.

'What are historians to do with such evidence?' White asked.

To European officials, these stories were proof of African superstition, and of the disorder that superstition so often caused. It was yet another groundless African belief, the details of which were not worth the recall of officials and observers. But to young Africans growing up in Kenya—or Tanganyika or Northern Rhodesia—in the 1930s, such practices were terrible but matter-of-fact events. (4)

The conventional historical response would be to try and find out about the 'truth' behind such stories, to treat them forensically, interrogating them for inconsistencies, triangulating them using other evidence (preferably not in the form of other stories) for corroboration. White's approach was radically different—she went as far as to describe it as a form of historical 'apostasy'. (113) 'What better way to reexamine the way historians have thought about evidence, reliability, and truth than by studying the history of things that never happened?' as she put it. (4)

This does not mean, as a historian, adopting a position of non-judgemental liberal detachment that equivocates about truth. She knew that the firemen of Mombasa were not abducting women to siphon off their blood. She acknowledged the 'confusions and misunderstanding' underlying these stories—confusions that, of course, go both ways, with white colonisers in 20th-century Africa (just as in seventeenth-century Virginia) misinterpreting certain rites performed by the native populations as evidence of cannibalism. But such confusions and misunderstanding tell us something, White contends. Those 'of the best kind [...] reveal the world of power and uncertainty' the story-tellers are concerned about. 'Their very falseness is what

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gives them meaning; they are a way of talking that encourages a reassessment of everyday experience to address the workings of power and knowledge and how regimes use them.' (41-3)

For the historian, White argues, discovering the meaning of such stories should come from observing their generic features, and then identifying what separates them in each telling. It is these differences, these details, which tend to give the stories their authority. She cites the example of Zebede Oyoyo, who reported escaping a vampire attack by the Nairobi fire brigade in the 1920s. He told a version that was well known among his neighbours, which was how it came to White's attention. When she interviewed him, the story began to shift. During the first interview, the emphasis was on his bold efforts to resist his abductors—'My fists were like sledgehammers', 'When I saw the chance, I dashed out of the room [...]. I outpaced them'. In a second encounter, Oyoyo provided more detail, about being seized in a urinal, about being taken to a 'certain room', about his efforts to escape. (38) It was these details that, much like the heart-shaped purses carried by Fugger's bankers mentioned in Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, made the story particular and therefore more meaningful.

Barbara Hanawalt's use of story-telling in medieval history was, perhaps, of a more conventional sort, but no less challenging to a realistic or positivistic approach to history. The thesis of her book *Growing Up in the Middle Ages* was conventionally historical, to show that 'the Middle Ages did recognize stages of life that corresponded to childhood and adolescence'. She wanted to challenge the 'inherent "Whigism"' that lay behind the assumption 'widespread [...] among professional historians, as well as among the general public' that the concept of childhood was essentially modern, a view promulgated in the French historian Philippe Ariès's influential 1960 work *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, translated into English in 1962 under the title *Centuries of Childhood*. (Hanawalt 1993: 5-7)

In her joint review with White of Schama's *Dead Certainties*, Hanawalt argued that 'the scholastic tradition of sticking closely to the sources and meticulously interpreting them puts limits on imagining contexts for the sources'. (Hanawalt and White 1993: 123) She attempted to overcome this in *Growing Up in the Middle Ages* by including

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short stories to illustrate or dramatize some feature of medieval childhood. Some of these stories were based on contemporary sources. For example:

In a story worthy of Chaucer's miller, Richard, son of John le Mareschall of Smithfield, was charged with abducting the wife of Stephen of Hereford. The neighbors were full of gossip about it. Richard had been seeing this woman for some time. When Stephen was away at Winchester Fair, Richard was at his house all the time, and the neighbors and friends of Stephen determined to put a halt to it. They searched the house for Richard, but could not find him. Finally, they directed the adulterous wife to open a chest closed with iron, and therein they found Richard. (123)

Hanawalt had found this story in court records, and few historians are likely to balk at its use. Such stories are particular and specific, so their representative value may be questionable, but they are often vivid and, within the context of a publicly-witnessed court process, usually considered to be reliable, and often authenticated by the sort of unexpected detail that White has shown can give a generic story convincing specificity—in this case, the discovery of the adulterous Richard in a 'chest closed with iron'.

But Hanawalt also used a different kind of story in her book. One, which introduces the work, has a priest telling a group of children gathered at a house in London's Cheapside a series of tales about various moral hazards they will face as they grow up. The tales themselves are drawn from contemporary sources (in particular, accounts of pageants that had taken place in the capital during the reign of Richard II), but the priest and the scenario binding the stories together together are fictional. (3-4, 228)

Elsewhere in the book, she developed some of these stories to explore particular issues and support her overall thesis that there was an awareness in the Middle Ages of childhood being a distinct stage in life. For example, the historical story of a child's mother being run over and killed by an earl's squire, and efforts by locals to apprehend the perpetrator and care for the orphan, becomes a tale demonstrating the communal histories that bound medieval children to their parish. (62-3)

Judged as fictions, Hanawalt's efforts are not always successful—some of her characters come over as caricatures, and the dialogue tends to be stilted or sham. But, even if they were more convincingly written, the question would remain: are they historical?

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In a preface to the book, Hanawalt argued that her fictions served to 'redress an imbalance in the records':

We always know more about the elite and about middle-class males because they leave records, are involved in disputes, run government and the economy, and so on. We often know only bits and pieces about the poor and the woman and children. The composite stories help to bring a completeness to sparse and scattered narratives that would otherwise be missing. (ix)

In other words, following the same logic as de Groot applied to historical fiction, storytelling can help historians fill 'the gaps of history'. History is about the passage of time, and the often tattered fragments of it that survive in the record tell you not only about those moments, but is suggestive of the moments that led up to them, and those that followed, all of which can be woven together with narrative acting as the thread.

§

The novelists Norman Mailer took a very dim view of historians. 'When you know the kind of bias and warp with which historians write their history,' he told one interviewer, 'they're dealing with 10,000 facts and they select 300 very careful ones to make their case, and call that stuff history when we all know it's fiction. The mark of a great historian is that he's a great fiction writer.' (Lennon 2006)

The issue arose because, though he made his name as a writer of fiction with his 1948 work *The Naked and the Dead*, from 1968 to 1983, one of the most productive periods of his career, he did not produce a single novel. His two masterpieces from that period were non-fiction: his account of the 1967 March on the Pentagon, *The Armies of the Night* (1968) and his monumental study of the murderer Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song* (1979). The first he subtitled 'History as a Novel, The Novel as History', the second, at least in early editions, he dubbed a 'true life novel'.

In his characteristically forthright way, he was contemptuous of efforts to distinguish fact from fiction. 'It's a dumb debate,' he asserted. He pointed out how in the 1975 novel *Ragtime*, E. L. Doctorow engineered an encounter between Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan which had resulted in what Mailer considered 'one of the best chapters in American literature' which told him 'an awful lot about Morgan and an awful lot about

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Henry Ford, and the fact that it obviously never took place made it even more delicious' (indeed, when Doctorow was himself asked if two other historical characters in the novel had actually met, his reply was 'They have now' (quoted in Gordon S Wood 1991)). (Lennon 2006: 96)

So what use, for the novelist, is history (or other forms of nonfiction, such as journalism), if not to provide '10,000 facts'? Ironically, for Mailer, it was not facts at all but the very thing of which some historians are so nervous: story. Writing nonfiction was 'vastly easier than trying to write novels', he told one interviewer, because 'I always had a terrible time with the story' and that is what nonfiction provided. (94)

The book that inspired *The Executioner's Song*, written by a man Mailer described as 'tart as a grand aunt, but a ballsy little guy, and [...] the most perfect writer of my generation,' was Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* published in 1966, about the murder of a wealthy farming family in Kansas. (Clarke 1988: 314-5) Capote chose to call it not a 'true-life novel', with that whiff of journalistic sensationalism, but a 'nonfiction novel', an oxymoron, as most characterise it, that the critic Alfred Kazin insightfully suggested he chose not to emphasise the nonfiction, but because he was desperate 'to keep his novelist's prestige'. (Kazin 2009: 23)

As in *The Executioner's Song*, the nonfiction status of *In Cold Blood* was never in doubt. It was based on a series of articles written by Capote for *The New Yorker*, which identified the actual people and places involved—the victims, their friends and neighbours, the investigating detectives, the two perpetrators, the remote Kansas village of Holcomb where the crime was committed, the graveyard where the victims were buried, the local police station, the gaols, the courts and the place of execution. Capote had been inspired to write the articles when he saw an article about the murder of the Clutter family in the *New York Times*, and persuaded the editor of *The New Yorker* to send him to Holcomb to write about it. With Harper Lee acting as his 'assistant researchist', he got to know the locals, including the Alvin Dewey of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, whose investigations led to the arrest of the murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. (Plimpton 1966) As well as securing Dewey's cooperation, he became a confidant of the murderers following their arrest, becoming particularly fascinated by the crippled autodidact drifter Smith.

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Kazin called the result 'meticulously factual', pointing out that Capote had accumulated six thousand pages of notes. Capote insisted on the point in an interview in the *New York Times* he gave to the editor of the *Paris Review*, George Plimpton. Plimpton cited an incident in the book when the renegade Smith and Hickock see a dog trotting along the side of the road, and Hickock swerves the car to run it over. (Capote 2000: 108) A reference to the dog in an earlier section relating to Smith and Hickock suggested to Plimpton that Capote had used the unfortunate creature as a narrative device, to link the two sections. 'Was there actually a dog at that exact point in the narrative?' he asked. Capote was insistent: 'There was a dog, and it was precisely as described. One doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions.' (Plimpton 1966)

This accuracy was maintained even though he did not use a tape recorder or notebook for his interviews, having trained himself, he told Plimpton, to 'transcribe conversation...within 95 per cent of absolute accuracy'. (41-2, 38) (In another *New York Times* article the level of accuracy was put at 92 per cent, and he told *Newsweek* that the technique was at best 90 per cent effective 'and who cares about the other ten per cent?' (De Bellis 1979))

So how accurate was he, assuming accuracy to be a metric to assess the work? In a 1966 article for *Esquire* magazine, Phillip K. Tompkins examined Capote's portrayal of Perry Smith. Seeking corroboration of some of the key scenes featuring Smith, he contacted Josephine Meiers, the wife of the undersheriff at the county court gaol where Smith was held following his arrest. In a touching scene that demonstrated the attachment between Mrs Meiers and Smith, which in turn was suggestive of an apparently brutal murderer's inner humanity, Capote related her account of washing dishes in the kitchen of the sheriff's residence, tormented by the sound of the previously taciturn prisoner breaking down:

I turned on the radio. Not to hear him. But I could. Crying like a child. He'd never broke down before, shown any signs of it. Well, I went to him. The door of his cell. He reached out his hand. He wanted me to hold his hand, and I did. I held his hand and all he said was 'I'm embraced by shame.' (Capote 2000: 300)

Tompkins claimed to have contacted Mrs Meier by phone, and she had told him 'repeatedly and firmly, in her gentle way, that these things were not true'—she had

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not been in the kitchen that day, nor had she turned up the radio to drown out Perry's cries. (Tompkins 1968: 53)*

Perhaps the most damning evidence of Capote's use of fabrication was revealed by his biographer Gerald Clarke. The book ends touchingly with a chance encounter between Detective Dewey and Susan Kidwell, a friend of the Clutter family, at the cemetery where the victims had been buried. According to Clarke, no such meeting took place. (Clarke 1988: 359)

One of Tompkins's complaints was that Capote's book was inadequately scrutinised because it was reviewed by literary critics rather than journalists or historians. While some, in part provoked by Capote's boasting, considered his claims to such high fidelity to the facts as examples of 'puffery', most took the work's accuracy as read, being dazzled by its aesthetic rather than journalistic or historical qualities, one declaring it 'a work of art, the work of an artist'. (Voss 2011: 61)

Sympathetic critics also noted that both *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song* were 'objective'. This is what also made the works distinct from the 'New Journalism' that emerged at around the same time, as produced by the likes of Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson and, indeed, Capote and Mailer. Capote featured heavily in *The Muses are Heard*, his 1956 first-person report for the *New Yorker* on a US production of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* which toured in the Soviet Union. And though referring to himself in the third person, Mailer was all over *The Armies of the Night*—he literally spelled out his name in capital letters, following his arrest for taking part in protests against the Vietnam War. (See Bloom 2009: 180, Mailer 1968: 180)

In Cold Blood, in contrast, was, Plimpton declared, 'remarkable for its objectivity'. He did not mean because of its journalistic integrity, but because 'nowhere, despite his involvement, does the author intrude'. (Plimpton 1966). In his review of the book for the *New York Times*, Conrad Knickerbocker noted that 'not the least of the book's

* Ralph Voss has questioned the validity of Tompkins's accusation, having found mention of the incident in Capote's field notes preserved in the New York Public Library. However, Voss is curiously coy about what the notes record, leaving the issue unresolved. (Voss 2011: 86)

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merits is that it manages a major moral judgment without the author's appearance once on stage'. (*New York Times Book Review*, 16 January, 1966: 37)

The authorial absence is even more notable in the case of Mailer, a forceful presence in works such as *White Negro*, as well as in American intellectual and political life in general. In *The Executioner's Song* he apparently achieved 'something like an...annulment of self, an "extinction of personality," in which he suppressed his own voice to become the medium for a variety of others'. (Edmundson 1990: 435) This absence, as one critic put it, 'dominates the book like an empty chair at a family dinner'. (Richard Stern quoted in Merrill 1992: 130)

The novelist Dave Eggers went further. In his introduction to a 2012 edition of *The Executioner's Song*, he declared it a masterpiece not because it was derived from an archive of material 'yet to be matched in the history of American journalism', but because it bore 'no markings of what we presume to be Mailer's prose style or point of view. Mailer once said that the book was given to him, whole and complete, from God, and it's difficult to argue with that'. (Mailer 2012: Foreword)

Whether or not the author's absence makes the work 'objective', perhaps one of the defining qualities of works of nonfiction such as history, is a moot point. Both *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song* are clearly authored and structurally and stylistically adventurous. *In Cold Blood*, for example, uses an intricately and brilliantly wrought interweaving of recollection and reportage, several timelines running in parallel to reveal the lives of the victims alongside those of the perpetrators, the unfolding of the crime alongside the ongoing investigations and the subsequent trial and execution. In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer's usually booming voice is muted by a highly effective form of ventriloquism, his use of free indirect discourse allowing the major characters apparently to tell their own stories in their own voices. This is evident when the protagonist Gilmore is first introduced with his cousin Brenda: 'Gary was kind of quiet. There was one reason they got along. Brenda was always gabbing and he was a good listener.' (Mailer 1998: 5; for other examples see Arlett 1987: 223, Nuttall 2009: 184)

The result of this combination of art and 'objectivity', according to some champions of the genre, is a unique form of realism, one that history alone, with its 10,000 facts, cannot achieve: fictional techniques, if not fiction, combining with fact to deliver not

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moral platitudes or easy answers, but, as Eggers put it, ‘raw, exasperating reality’. (Mailer 2012, Foreword) Similarly, Knickerbocker declared in his *New York Times* review that Capote’s aim ‘to declare a reality that transcended reality’ had succeeded in producing ‘a total evocation of reality’. (*New York Times Book Review*, 16 January, 1966: 1, 37) Reality, in other words, was what such books provided—not physical reality, or historical reality, but the reality that transcends reality, revealed through narrative art.

Fiction and History

'The certainty of direct reference of the historical novel or even the nonfictional novel is gone,' wrote Linda Hutcheon (1989: 3). She identified a cultural response to this loss of a 'direct' historical referent, which she awkwardly dubbed 'historiographic metafiction', claiming it to be a kind of paradigm of postmodern literature. This genre 'challenges...any naive realist concept of representation' but also any 'naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world'. (6) The examples she cited include *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Ragtime*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *The Name of the Rose*. (3)

Hutcheon did not come up with her category just for critical convenience. She argued that it tells us something about the relationship of history to fiction. Works like *The Name of the Rose*, through parody and self-reflexivity, show 'there is no one writable "truth" about history and experience, only a series of versions' (8) and by exposing this 'loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing', we are able to take a 'step toward intellectual self-awareness'. (10)

The sign of a work of historiographic metafiction, in her view, is its 'interdiscursivity', the 'collective modes of discourse from which the postmodern parodically draws'. (12) A recent and revealing example might be Laurent Binet's *HHhH* (2012). It is a book about an historic event: 'Operation Anthropoid', an attempt made by two Czech parachutists in Prague, 1942 to assassinate Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Nazi secret services and 'the most dangerous man in the Third Reich'. He was an influential and ambitious member of the Nazi elite, a quip popular among his SS colleagues giving the book its distinctive title: '*Himmlers Hirn heisst Heydrich*' (Himmler's brain is called Heydrich). In a peritext, the author declares that 'all the characters in *HHhH* are real. All the events depicted are true.' (Binet 2012: About the Book) Yet he describes himself as a novelist, and the French prizes that gave the work its literary prestige, including the Prix Goncourt, categorised it as a novel. Also, writers who garlanded it in accolades were not distinguished historians of the Second World War, but novelists such as Martin Amis, Mario Vargas Llosa and Bret Easton Ellis. (*The Observer*, 29 April, 2012, p42)

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So which is it, a work of history or fiction? Both—an epitome of interdiscursivity. Binet uses fictional techniques, such as characterisation and dialogue, but they are interspersed with passages and whole sections written as conventional narrative history. The other discourse at work is that of the memoirist. A commentary runs through the text, in which Binet recounts his struggles to come to terms with his project, what it is about, and most of all the ‘temptation to make things up’. The first part of the book begins with an epigram, quoting Osip Mandelstam: ‘Once again, the writer stains the tree of History with his thoughts.’ And, right from the start, the narrator (let us call him Binet) acknowledges that he is leaving stains on every tree that lines the narrative path. In the first chapter, he introduces the reader to Jozef Gabčík, lying on a ‘little iron bed’ in a darkened apartment. Binet attempts to objectify Gabčík, to make clear that he ‘existed, and it was to this name that he answered’, that he is part of a story that is ‘as true as it is extraordinary’, that he is the man who, with his colleagues, took part in what Binet considers ‘one of the greatest acts of resistance in human history, and without doubt the greatest of the Second World War’. But by manufacturing this image of him lying on a bed in a darkened room, of him listening to the creaking of the trams passing his shuttered window, ‘I am reducing this man to the ranks of a vulgar character and his actions to literature: an ignominious transformation.’ (Binet 2012: 3)

The book continues in this tone, Binet striving to reconcile his fictionalising urges with his historicising ones: ‘I’m not sure yet if I’m going to “visualize” (that is, invent!) this meeting or not. If I do, it will be the clinching proof that fiction does not respect anything’; ‘I had this vision of Himmler red-faced and with a blocked nose (perhaps because I’ve had a nasty cold myself for the past four days) and my tyrannic imagination wouldn’t budge from this idea’. (106, 128) He agonises over whether he should invent a character, which his brother-in-law (‘with whom I’ve discussed all this’) describes as being like ‘planting false proof at a crime scene where the floor is already strewn with incriminating evidence’. (227) He thinks he is corrupted by literature, that to be a novelist is to be a trickster; he finds ‘cheap literary effects’ irresistible. (242, 187, 254).

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He is also corrupted, or troubled, by the history. He regularly reminds the reader of the struggles of research, of how patchy and ambiguous the historical record can be. At one point, he is wondering if he should 'be like Victor Hugo' and indulge in a lengthy digression on the town of Halle, where Heydrich was born in 1904. He imagines walking around, describing the streets, the food, the people... But he demurs, because 'there are two towns in Germany called Halle, and I don't even know which one I'm talking about'. (19)

Beneath the anxiety and squeamishness, the charming modesty and impish jealousy (which give the book a parodic quality that contrasts with the grim nature of the historical subject matter) lies the realisation that the work's interdiscursivity, its mixing of fact and imagination, results in an unstable compound, like one of those elements that exist on the periodic table and in the laboratory, but not in nature:

I [...] read lots of historical novels, to see how others deal with the genre's constraints. Some are keen to demonstrate their extreme accuracy, others don't bother, and a few manage skilfully to skirt around the historical truth without inventing too much. I am struck all the same by the fact that, in every case, fiction wins out over history. (17)

That is what happened with *The Angel of Ferrara*. Fiction won out—or, I felt, should have done, which, as a writer of nonfiction, I found disconcerting. When dealing with a historical character such as Tarquinia Molza, a novelist might with the best will in the world try to preserve her historical integrity, to keep the facts of her biography pristine, but the fiction starts to interact with the fact, to change it. One cannot demarcate the one from the other, as the writer and still less as the reader; the discourses intermingle and what they become is not something else, some hybrid of fact and fiction that constitutes a third epistemological state—they become fiction. Binet's qualms reflected this; they exposed an unease that bolder novelists, the Pynchons and the Doctorows, have the confidence to ignore or obliterate. That is perhaps what makes them heroic, but which, to those who have a more ambivalent view of literature's moral and philosophical objectives and achievements, could make their works specious.

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The historian Hayden White has worked harder than most to introduce postmodernism to historiography, and to explore the foggy boundary between history and fiction in which historiographic metafiction like *HHhH* lose themselves. During the 1960s, boundary disputes between the 'pure' sciences and the humanities triggered by the emergence of the social sciences drew White into questioning the disciplinary identity of his profession. Into which category should history fall? In a 1966 paper, he noted that historians had tried to deal with this question by adopting what he called a 'Fabian' tactic of occupying the 'epistemologically neutral middle ground that supposedly exists between art and science'. But White doubted it was possible to occupy such a middle ground, because it implied a polarity that does not exist. The two-cultures divide, to use C. P. Snow's characterisation of the division between science and the arts, was an illusion fostered by 'the romantic artist's fear of science and the positivistic scientist's ignorance of art'. White noted that the 'discovery', which he then attributed primarily to advances in psychology, of the 'common constructivist character of both artistic and scientific statements' had dissolved the distinction. Modern criticism, he claimed, 'has achieved a clearer understanding of the operations by which the artist expresses his vision of the world and the scientist frames his hypotheses about it', and provided a common approach to studying both. (White 1966: 111-2)

His magnum opus, *Metahistory*, published in 1973, tried to demonstrate this thesis by using a 'constructivist' approach in an analysis of the great masterpieces of nineteenth-century historical writing. The construct he used was the trope, developing an elaborate 'tropological' system to explore what these writers produced not in terms of its authenticity and plausibility as an account of the past, but the rhetorical methods used. As one admirer put it, by treating the 'great texts of nineteenth-century historians as if they were novels—something no theorist had ever done before', White had produced 'a new and exciting form of historiography that was unlike anything that had previously be done in the field'. (Ankersmit 1994: 7-8)

Over the following years, White's thinking evolved somewhat erratically in papers scattered around a variety of academic journals and essay collections (see Kansteiner 1993), but he ended up declaring himself a resolute postmodernist, adopting it not just

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as a theory, but as an ideology with profound implications for the role and meaning of history:

What we postmodernists are against is a professional historiography, in service to state apparatuses that have turned against their own citizens, with its epistemically pinched, ideologically sterile, and superannuated notions of objectivity—a historiography which, in cutting itself off from the resources of poiesis (invention) and artistic writing, also severed its ties to what was most creative in the real sciences it sought half-heartedly to emulate. (White 2005: 156)

Novelists, White argued, had become the true historians, by exploring and exposing the essential fictionality of historical discourse through ‘the tendency to bring language into question, to indict its claims to transparency and univocity of meaning’. (White 2010: 189)

Inevitably, such ideas appalled many historians. In *Return to Essentials*, his rousing defence of ‘professional historiography’, Geoffrey Elton condemned White for reducing history to rhetoric, of conflating history with the philosophy of history, of producing ‘altogether meaningless verbiage, testifying only to a general lack of experience in trying actually to write serious history, and more especially history beyond the narrow confines of the history of ideas’. (Elton 2002: 34) In a review of Elton’s book, Laurence Stone was equally scornful. ‘We should fight to preserve from the attacks by extreme relativists, from Hayden White to Derrida, the hard-won professional expertise in the study of evidence that was worked out in the late nineteenth century.’ (‘Dry Heat, Cool Reason’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 Jan, 1992)

So who is right? Is a historical novel like *The Angel of Ferrara* epistemologically equivalent to a work of history such as *Savage Kingdom*, a fictional story essentially the same as a ‘true’ one? As has been shown in previous chapters, both rely on research and narrative, both engage in fictions and deal with facts. So what separates them?

Most criticism, particularly of the sort associated with a postmodern position, considers such issues from the perspective of the reader—indeed, as Barthes has told us, the author is dead. But how does a writer see it? If you write both types of book,

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use both discourses, is the difference one of degree or taste or emphasis, or one of kind?

§

In 2011, the Institute of Historical Research ran a symposium on the relationship of history to historical fiction entitled 'Novel Approaches'. Its opening session was a discussion between the Tudor historian David Loades and Hilary Mantel. Loades confessed that he did not read much historical fiction, but was clear on what distinguished his profession from Mantel's:

The difference between the historian and the writer of historical fiction is one of priorities. The former accepts a responsibility to be true to the record, where the latter is primarily an entertainer who happens to use a historical period as the context of his story. [21:20]*

In other words, similar materials may be involved, but the results are of a very different nature (and, he implied, significance).

Mantel was too polite to challenge Loades's dismissive and perhaps patronising view of fiction, but she did seem to agree that the two enterprises were somewhat, perhaps even fundamentally distinct. 'Historians rely on hindsight, it's their tool,' she said. 'Empathy is the equivalent for historical novelists.' [36:10]

While she acknowledged the existence of 'facts', and believed that showing them due respect was important to the historical novelist's work, she felt that they were transformed when they come in contact with fiction. Journalists, she noted, were always asking her "'How much of this is fact?'" as if there were two neat categories':

But if I were to try and disentangle fact from fiction, for example in *Wolf Hall*, I would have to footnote every line [...]. And even if I did footnote every line I couldn't pinpoint, I couldn't pin it down for you the sort of alchemical process by which fact metamorphoses into fiction. [34:52]

* The citations in [square brackets] indicate the approximate starting positions in minutes and seconds of the video recording of the session posted by the IHR on its website at <http://www.history.ac.uk/podcasts/novel-approaches-academic-history-historical-fiction/hilary-mantel-and-david-loades>.

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Having written both works of history and now, with *The Angel of Ferrara*, historical fiction, I would agree with her that some transformative process occurs, and it is one that derives from a fundamental difference underlying the two discourses.

One obvious difference lies in her reference to the absence of footnotes. Citations are a rarity in historical novels, or novels of any sort, for the reasons Mantel gave. David Foster Wallace famously used footnotes in his masterwork *Infinite Jest*, but as a stylistic device to reflect the non-linear, disorderly nature of ‘thought patterns and fact patterns’, as he put it, rather than as a way of validating the information the work contains. (Burn 2012: 86) The pseudo-fictional elements of *Savage Kingdom* were fully footnoted, in an effort to identify the sources they drew upon and how these sources were used. But there are no footnotes in *The Angel of Ferrara*, and, like Mantel, I cannot imagine how they could be included. The reasons for this are practical as much as ‘alchemical’. A fiction requires frequent reworking, and with each redraft the fictional events or characters can and often do creep away from their historical counterparts. As a metafictional experiment, using some elaborate citational scheme to note the interactions of the history and fiction might prove to be interesting, but the result would not be a conventional novel, or even a novel.

That is not to say that facts do not matter in fiction. One can imagine the credibility of a work of historical fiction being damaged if information assumed to be factual was shown to be inaccurate—but that, I would argue, is because such inaccuracies act as artefacts (in the scientific sense), like typographical errors or narrative inconsistencies, distracting the reader’s efforts to suspend disbelief. They do not ultimately determine the quality or validity of the fiction.

In the case of *The Angel of Ferrara*, I have shown how history inspired the idea of a story about castrati. But major elements of the story, such as the ‘manufactory of eunuchs’, were imaginary. Such a ‘manufactory’ could have existed in Italy at around the period in which the book is set, and its morally and theologically dubious status would make it all the more likely to escape notice. However, I would not judge the success of the novel as a piece of writing on the basis of whether or not such a manufactory really existed. If evidence of one turned up in the records, I would not count it as vindication or validation of the work.

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In contrast, if a new account surfaced of how, say, the Virginia Indians practiced their religion or described their origins, or it turned out that a third-party report existed of Captain John Smith's encounter with Pocahontas, I would see that as having an important impact on *Savage Kingdom*, not just on the content but the manner in which the 'true story' should be told.

What, then, produces this difference? If a historical work can use fictional techniques and fiction can use historical research, why make the discrimination?

Here is a tentative proposal, ironically inspired by the historian who suggested that effectively no such discrimination could be made. In a paper on historical fiction, Hayden White considered the work of the French essayist Michel de Certeau, which he expressed thus:

Historical discourse wagers everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real—which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable. A simply true account of the world based on [...] the documentary record [...] can provide knowledge of only a very small portion of what 'reality' consists of. However, the rest of the real, after we have said what we can assert to be true about it, would not be everything and anything we could imagine about it. The real would consist of everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be. (White 2005: 147)

Here, White, or rather de Certeau, is using a conception of reality that is well established in the scientific realm. My first book, *Virtual Worlds* (1992) was about 'virtual reality' (VR). Though notionally about a technology that was then (and at this writing remains) nowhere near delivering what it promises, the book was a wider survey of the notion of reality in the age of simulation. One of the claims I explored was that, in an infinite universe, the real must include not only what is actual or observable, but what the laws of mathematics and physics determined to be possible (or virtual).

James Wood described Mantel's work as having a 'cunning universalism'. The adjective suggests that he thinks there is something bogus about it, but I would argue that, like all effective historical fiction, it has a universalism that comes from giving the reader glimpses of reality—not natural, physical reality, the realm of science, but cultural, social, one might even say human reality. History can tell us what may or may not be

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true about this reality, but fiction shows us what is real. Historical novels are, in that sense, like experiments or simulations, testing out hypothetical possibilities (which may include variations or even contradictions of the known facts) to establish what lies in the domain of the real.

This is not to say that novels, to be properly fictional, must conform to the conventions of literary realism or naturalism. Writing in *The New York Times*, Salman Rushdie pointed out that the ‘magic realism’ associated with the works of Gabriel García Márquez (as well as his own) is not just about the magic:

If magic realism were just magic, it wouldn’t matter. It would be mere whimsy—writing in which, because anything can happen, nothing has effect. It’s because the magic in magic realism has deep roots in the real, because it grows out of the real and illuminates it in beautiful and unexpected ways, that it works. (Rushdie 2014)

J. G. Ballard’s 1973 novel *Crash* is a determinedly postmodern work (the subject of a 1976 essay by Baudrillard, no less (Baudrillard and Evans 1991)), yet its author wrote this in an introductory note, using a wide definition of fiction to reach a similar conclusion about reality:

I feel the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decades. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass-merchandizing, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. It is not less and less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer’s task is to invent the reality.

Echoing de Certeau’s theory, Ballard believed that the role of the novelist had come close to ‘that of the scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory faced with an unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise various hypotheses and test them against the facts.’ (Ballard 2014: Introduction)

I think this approach could also help sort out the status of works that appear to hover on the borderline between history (or journalism) and fiction, in particular nonfiction novels such as *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner’s Song* that apparently challenged the border’s existence. Their value lies not in their conformity to truth which, as we have seen, is sometimes dubious, but in their ability to expose ‘raw, exasperating reality’ or a ‘total evocation of reality’. George Eliot hinted at such a view when she described, in

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the Proem to *Romola*, the angel of the dawn beholding Florence 'as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the flux of human things, to remind us that we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ them, as the great mechanical principles on which those domes and towers were raised must make a likeness in human building that will be broader and deeper than all possible change'. (Eliot 1993: 3-4) Thus the human continuities are raised almost to the realm of physical laws. Or as Auden put it, writing of his own poetical art: 'all facts and all beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities.' (Auden 1962: 28)

Of course, whether or not a particular work of fiction, regardless of truth, comes close to any sort of reality is moot. Historians can argue for the validity of their work. It is a much tougher job for novelists. There is no equivalent to the mathematical modelling or simulation used in the physical sciences (and, arguably, nor should there be, as it is a human not mechanical reality that is being explored). The success of fiction remains a matter of aesthetic instinct, judgment and experience, decided by critical connoisseurship or posterity.

This is what makes it so difficult for someone who has written history to write fiction, and is perhaps the reason why so few historians have successfully made the transition. If you know how hard-won historical facts and hypotheses can be, if you have experienced the slog of working through hand lists and archives, of deciphering crossed-letter writing or minuscule or Elizabethan secretary hand, the idea of making it all 'cease to be true or false' with a flick of the pen or a tap of the keyboard can seem careless and arbitrary. The desire to exhibit the research is hard to resist, and the reluctance to manipulate the facts to see where they will take you hard to overcome. While writing *The Angel of Ferrara*, I often found myself unsure how and to what extent I should exercise my artistic licence and when I should use my historical discretion. I found I was sometimes reckless when I should have been restrained, at other times timid when I should have been bold. But I did learn that, despite superficial similarities, whatever I was writing was fundamentally different from what I had written before, requiring different skills, aiming at different objectives.

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