

THESIS REGISTERED WITH THE  
**A SECRET ALCHEMY**

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**Submitted for the degree of PhD**

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## ABSTRACT

*A Secret Alchemy* consists of my novel, *A Secret Alchemy*, and a critical commentary on the process and context of writing it.

The novel reimagines the world of Elizabeth Woodville (1437?-1492), the mother of the Princes in the Tower, and her brother Anthony Woodville (1442?-1483). In their voices, it tells their story from childhood, through Anthony's murder by Richard III and the disappearance of the Princes, to Elizabeth's old age. These two narrative strands intertwine with a third: Una Pryor, a modern bibliographer, is researching the Woodvilles' books. As she tries to save the family printing business, secrets, loves and rivalries from her own past reawaken, and interact with her experience of the Woodville story, culminating in her realisation that to bring the Woodvilles alive she must write them as fiction.

The commentary explores the particular issues which arise in fiction which is based on real historical figures, starting from the process of writing the novel but also embracing critical and theoretical issues and the work of other novelists. Following a discussion of the complex relationship of such fiction to the historical record, it examines how parallel narrative fiction such as *A Secret Alchemy* embodies that relationship. It then looks at voice, whose role as both medium and message makes questions of historical authenticity particularly complex. Finally these questions are brought together in discussing historical fiction as storytelling, in the context of narrative theory. Atwood states that it is in fiction that individual and collective memory and experience come together; the commentary proposes that historical fiction is unique in how it does so, by virtue of its double-duality: 'not only then, but also now,' and 'not only fiction but also history'.

*A Secret Alchemy* was written under contract to Headline Review and it incorporated editorial changes, some of which are discussed here. It was published in November 2008, and in the US by Harper Perennial in June 2009.

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# **A SECRET ALCHEMY**

The full text of the novel  
A Secret Alchemy, by  
Emma Darwin,  
which forms the first part  
of this thesis, is available  
in commercially published  
print and electronic editions.

The author has therefore  
restricted access to the novel  
in this thesis.

***A SECRET ALCHEMY:***  
**Commentary and Context**

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# INTRODUCTION

The central theme of my novel *A Secret Alchemy* is storytelling, and this commentary itself is also an act of storytelling. It extrapolates backwards from the finished novel, and attempts a coherent account of what is an often incoherent and mysterious process of creation.

Although that creative process may be put to the service of an artistic purpose which can be discussed and analysed, how the process served that purpose is only partly accessible to the creator. Throughout the writing of the novel I was aware of the separation of the two aspects of this thesis – creative and analytical – and at one point articulated it:

Fergus says, ‘You know, one of the things I always think when I’m reading books about artists is how unlikely it all sounds. I mean, compared to when you’re there in the studio with the plaster bandage all hot and wet in your hands and a maquette that won’t stand up and five minutes to get it right before it all goes wrong and dries that way forever. I’m not sure art historians understand the doing of it. Even if they read letters and things. When you’re doing it you don’t think, I want this to be a new stage in my developing sense of spatial form. You think, *how can I get the bloody thing to stand up, or would it work better lying down anyway?*’

I laugh. ‘But you do think that later, don’t you? About spatial form?’

‘Yes, of course. When I’m teaching or having an argument with another artist. And certainly if I was writing my memoirs.’ He laughs. ‘Though other people see things that I haven’t sometimes. They fit it into a story I didn’t know it was part of. But at the time, no. And yet... what’s more real, more interesting? More true even? That moment, all plaster? Or where it fits in a story you didn’t even know about then, but can see so clearly when you look back? (p.214)<sup>1</sup>

My original purpose in writing *A Secret Alchemy* was to recreate and re-imagine the lives of Elizabeth and Anthony Woodville. In much of the work of writing any novel the genre is irrelevant, but the historical setting does present particular challenges, and it is on these, and how I tried to meet them, that this commentary concentrates. Then there are the more particular difficulties posed by using two real historical characters as protagonists and narrators. These difficulties I discuss in Chapter One, ‘Fictional History, Historical Fiction’, while ‘Parallel Narrative’ expands on my solution, which was chiefly structural. Chapter Three, ‘Voice’, examines the issues at stake when the medium, as well as the message, of a novel must engage with the historical record as well as modern readers’ experience. Finally, ‘Storytelling’ draws these discussions together to examine how these elements work to create the single experience of reading a novel. The commentary ends by arguing that if the novel embodies the coming together of individual memory and experience, as Margaret

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Darwin, ‘A Secret Alchemy’. All page references are to the version which forms the first part of this doctoral thesis, not to published editions of the novel, and will be given in the text from now on, identified as ‘ASA’ where clarity requires it.

Atwood suggests in her essay 'In Search of *Alias Grace*',<sup>2</sup> then historical fiction is uniquely fitted to do so, since the double-duality of its particular nature integrates the 'not only then but also now' of history-writing with 'not only veracity but also possibility' of fiction, as no other genre can.

Each chapter begins with a discussion of general and technical issues, and then moves on to examine how I dealt with them in *A Secret Alchemy*, and how other contemporary novelists have tackled the same issues. I have used critical and theoretical terms and arguments where they illuminate the practice of writing and reading, but since the focus of this commentary is on process as much as product, in the main I have turned to other creative writers for critical insights. Before then, however, it is necessary to set out a working definition and context for the genre.

Perhaps because the novel first emerged in the guise of non-fictional forms concerned with the present day – journals, diaries, biographies – it was some time before novelists began to exploit the growing historical consciousness of readers, and set whole novels in periods beyond the writer's (if not the reader's) living memory. For this commentary I have used Atwood's definition of the historical novel as a novel set in the historic past 'before the time at which the novel-writer came to consciousness'.<sup>3</sup> This excludes, for example, Eliot's *Middlemarch*, despite it amply fulfilling the criterion which Georg Lukács' insists upon in his seminal, Marxist study, *The Historical Novel*,<sup>4</sup>: that a historical novel must be centrally concerned with the effect of historical processes on individual lives. Atwood's definition also excludes L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, which is rooted in Hartley's own childhood, although its famous opening line, 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'<sup>5</sup> expresses exactly the tension between 'now' and 'then' which is so central to how historical fiction works, as I shall discuss in Chapter Four, 'Storytelling'. However, other definitions depend on defining the boundaries of 'fiction' and 'history', neither of which, as Joseph W. Turner points out in his essay, 'The Kinds of Historical Fiction', is 'a stable, universally agreed upon, concept'.<sup>6</sup> Atwood's definition, by contrast, centres on the writer's decision to set fiction in a period which he or she cannot have experienced directly, and thus focusses on the *writer's* process of working with the consequences of that decision.

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *The American Historical Review*, 103 (1998), 1503-1516 (p.1504).

<sup>3</sup> Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p.1510.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: The Merlin Press, 1989), p.37-38.

<sup>5</sup> L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Penguin 1997), p.5.

Taking Atwood's working definition, the standard genealogy of historical fiction given in reference works such as the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*,<sup>7</sup> traces the historical novel from LaFayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*, by way of the Gothic novel, to Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, and then Scott's *Waverley*. As well as Scott's obvious heirs, such as Bulwer-Lytton and Ainsworth, many major nineteenth century novelists wrote historical fiction, including Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot and Hardy. Their concern with exploring the reality of contemporary life parallels the historicism of their contemporary Ranke. He described the historian's aim as 'merely to show how things actually were'.<sup>8</sup> But in the twentieth century history, as a discipline, fell into a post-Historicist, post-first-world-war 'scepticism and disorientation', as Richard J. Evans describes it in his book *In Defence of History*.<sup>9</sup> Despite this disorientation being echoed in novels such as Woolf's *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*, the enormous commercial success of swashbuckling 'male' romance of Conan Doyle and Sabatini, which evolved via the intermediate swashbuckling 'female' novels of Orczy and Farnol, into the 'female' romance and romantic comedy of Plaidy and Heyer,<sup>10</sup> seems to have engendered a critical confusion between subject and execution in the genre. Any novel with an historical setting was at risk of being marginalised as romance. This confusion was compounded by Leavis's enormously influential exclusion of Scott from the canon, not only on the grounds that Scott 'made no serious attempt to work out his own form' but, in a clear condemnation of the entire genre, because 'out of Scott a bad tradition came'<sup>11</sup>.

As Evans describes, history was brought out <sup>of</sup> its doldrums by Namier and his adherents, who practised a minutely painstaking scholarship which moved away from the stories and personalities which history-writing had shared with fiction, and towards a quasi-scientific concern with objectivity and measurement. They refused grand narrative and interpretation, 'saw no pattern in history, and distrusted ideas and ideologies'.<sup>12</sup> Despite critical neglect, however, serious writers of historical fiction such as Mitchison, Graves, F.

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph W. Turner, 'The Kinds of Historical Fiction: An Essay in Definition and Methodology', *Genre*, 12 (1979), 333-355 (p.333).

<sup>7</sup> *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. by Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Extract translated in G. P. Gooch, *History and the Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1952), p.74. Michael Bentley suggests that this standard translation of Ranke's phrase '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*' encouraged a mistakenly literal 'cult of objectivity' among historians, whereas Ranke's use is better translated as what happened 'in essence'; the latter meaning arguably legitimates the claims of historical fiction to some kind of essential if not literal truth. (Michael Bentley, 'Introduction: Approaches to Modernity', in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. by Michael Bentley (London: Routledge, 1997), p.421)

<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997), p.32.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Hughes, *The Historical Romance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.3.

<sup>11</sup> Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p.5, note 2.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, p.35.

Tennyson Jesse, Renault, Golding and Nye continued to explore the possibilities of the genre. In the late twentieth century postmodernism's assault on the assumption of the possibility of absolute truth, and its assertion of the equal validity of all texts and interpretations, have coincided with a historiographical reaction against Namierian 'objectivity' and back towards the value of narrative history, to make bestsellers of books such as Simon Schama's *Citizens* (which, as I discuss in Chapter One, has so much in common with Mantel's novel *A Place of Greater Safety*); these two developments are synthesised in novels such as Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Byatt's *Possession* and much of Ackroyd's fiction.

The very concept of the historical record, with which the novelist must form a relationship (whether of adherence, avoidance, contradiction or most commonly a mixture of all three), has been problematised by historiographers. Discussion of the relationship usually takes for granted the common sense definition of 'facts' as Evans summarises it: 'A historical fact is something that happened in history and can be verified as such through the traces history has left behind[...] it really is there entirely independently of the historian'<sup>13</sup>. But the assembling of facts into the historical *record*, from which both novelists and their readers take their knowledge of the past, is more problematic. All records, whether family account books, or an avowedly personal account of that family, are shaped as much by the biases and discourses of their time, as they are by the facts they appear to record. As Evans says, 'as historians we clearly cannot recover a single, unalterably "true" meaning of a dispatch simply by reading it; on the other hand, we cannot impose any meaning we wish to on such a text either' (p.106). 'Discourse does not construct the past itself; the most that it is possible to argue is that it constructs our attempts to represent it' (p.109).

However, 'our attempts to represent it' are all we have in our desire to understand the past. This being so, not only are fiction and history unstable terms, but it is remarkably difficult to draw a stable boundary between them. As the philosopher and novelist Richard Kearney puts it in his study of narrative, *On Stories*, the mimetic process of both 'resides in a certain "gap" demarcating the narrated world from the lived one'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in his study of historiography, *The Pursuit of History*, John Tosh reflects that 'it is in the act of writing that historians make sense of their research experience[...] only the discipline of seeking to express it in continuous prose with a beginning and an end enables the researcher to grasp the connections'.<sup>15</sup> This, by implication, extends some aspects of the legitimacy of written history to historical fiction, even if the veracity which each form claims has different foundations: as Kearney observes, 'the "gap" between reality and representation [in written

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<sup>13</sup> Evans, p.76.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), p.133.

history] is of a qualitatively different kind from that operating in fiction'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Tosh goes on to state that 'the re-creation of the past[...] is more than a purely intellectual task[...]It requires imaginative powers and an eye for detail not unlike those of the novelist'.<sup>17</sup>

*A Secret Alchemy* exploits the implications of Tosh's assertion to go one step further. In doing so it ends with Una's growing realisation that she can only recreate historical lives through fiction: it is with the beginning of that recreation, in which to some degree she is my and the reader's representative, that I begin this commentary.

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<sup>15</sup> John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, rev. 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2002), p.140.

<sup>16</sup> Kearney, p.135.

<sup>17</sup> Tosh, p.141.

## One

# FICTIONAL HISTORY, HISTORICAL FICTION

Even within the particular difficulties of imagination and evocation posed by setting a novel in history, there are problems peculiar to novels which use real historical figures as protagonists and/or narrators. Maintaining what John Gardner in his seminal book on creative writing, *The Art of Fiction*, calls the ‘vivid and continuous dream’<sup>18</sup> which any fiction must produce in the reader, depends not only on the quality and style of the writing, but also on the reader trusting the writer to ‘deal honestly and responsibly’ with him or her (p.99). In historical fiction such honest dealing includes how what are held to be historical facts are dealt with. As the critic Neil McEwan puts it,

Historical novelists are privileged by our consent in their freedom to speculate but they are constrained by the real, and they will not hold attention unless they respect the past which is common to all readers.<sup>19</sup>

The writer must ‘get it right’, in other words, though *it* – McEwan’s ‘real’ – is rarely defined. Trust and therefore attention are broken if the reader thinks that material historical detail is wrong, and yet a novel is not a retelling of the historical record, but a re-imagining of it; it claims to truth, as Kearney puts it, are that it is ‘free to recreate the past *as it might have been*’,<sup>20</sup> as possibilities, when written history deals in the probabilities, and the (albeit problematical) fact.

I have defined historical fiction, following Atwood, in terms of the writer’s process in setting the novel in the past, but in his study *The English Historical Novel*, Avrom Fleishmann adds two different criteria. His first criterion is manifestly ~~untrue~~<sup>untenable</sup>, since there are many excellent and unarguably historical novels which contradict it:

there is an unspoken assumption that the plot must include a number of historical events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters.<sup>21</sup>

And when it comes to fiction using real historical figures, Fleishmann insists on an even stranger criterion, ‘on *prima facie* grounds’.

There is an obvious theoretical difficulty in the status of ‘real’ historical personages in ‘invented’ fictions, but their presence is not a mere matter of taste. It is necessary to

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<sup>18</sup> John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p.31.

<sup>19</sup> Neil McEwan, *Perspective in British Historical Fiction Today* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1987), p.13.

<sup>20</sup> Kearney, p.31.

<sup>21</sup> Avrom Fleishmann, *The English Historical Novel* (London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p.3.

include at least one such figure in a novel if it is to qualify as historical. (p.3)

Fleishmann never explains the basis for this contention, which seems to originate in Lukács's Marxist conception of historical change<sup>22</sup>. Fleishmann describes how this casts the 'hero' (*sic*) of historical fiction as 'one whose life is shaped by world-historical figures',<sup>23</sup> while being entirely fictional himself. As Lukács sees it, Scott's world-historical figures come along as minor characters, once the major characters of the novel have 'depict[ed] all the problems of popular life which lead up to the historical crisis he has represented'.<sup>24</sup> The world-historical figure's role is to be 'complete in a psychological sense when he appears before us, for he appears in order to fulfil his historic mission in the crisis'. In what she calls Tremain's Law,<sup>25</sup> novelist Rose Tremain too relegates real historical figures to something like this emblematic function: in her opinion such figures may form the background and surroundings of a novel, but must not be the chief protagonists; she makes no such claims for their absolute function, and certainly not for their necessity, although her novels *Restoration* and *Music and Silence* include important and elaborately characterised real historical figures. Fleishmann's contention is surely a case of 'historicist' history, and excludes a great deal of fiction which no common sense definition of historical fiction would exclude. Moreover, as Diana Wallace argues in *The Woman's Historical Novel*,<sup>26</sup> since women were largely excluded from public events, this is an example of 'male' history being regarded as the only 'real' history, and therefore being allowed to define 'real' historical fiction.

Fleishmann's book was published in 1971, and in 1978 Tillie Olsen's *Silences* 'changed what we read in the academy, what we write, and what we count'.<sup>27</sup> Not only history but also literature, and the study of those disciplines, now encompasses marginalised groups – women, servants, other races – and historical fiction is no exception. Fiction writers have rejoiced in the possibilities of giving voices to the voiceless in history, and not only to shed light on better-known figures: as the critic Diana Wallace points out in her essay, 'Why Tulips? A Case-study in Historicising the Historical Novel',<sup>28</sup> Tracey Chevalier's bestselling

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<sup>22</sup> Lukács, p.12-88.

<sup>23</sup> Fleishmann, p.11.

<sup>24</sup> Lukács, p.38.

<sup>25</sup> Rose Tremain, Richard Hoggart Lecture Series, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 15th October 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel, British Women Writers 1900-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.9.

<sup>27</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, 'Introduction', in Tillie Olsen, *Silences*, 25th Anniversary edn (New York: Feminist Press, 2003), p.xii.

<sup>28</sup> Diana Wallace, 'Why Tulips? A Case-Study in Historicising the Historical Novel', in *Historicising the Historical Novel*, Sheffield Hallam Working Papers, 9 (2006) <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/historicising/Wallace.htm>> , [accessed 22nd April 2009].

novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* asserts the importance of the girl's story as an artistic woman in the 17th century quite as much as it illuminates Vermeer's; critics who dismiss the novel on the grounds that its re-invention of a known historical figure is not convincing are missing the point. Novelists have also exploited the reader's existing awareness of visible but silent figures, from Anya Seton in her perennially best-selling novel *Katherine*, the story of John of Gaunt's mistress-turned-wife Katherine Swynford, to Peter Ackroyd in *Chatterton*, in which he conceives of Chatterton as writing in other voices because (at least in Ackroyd's fiction) as a provincial boy of humble birth he could not get his own voice heard. It is the voices of such known historical figures that *A Secret Alchemy* reclaims and re-imagines, and it is to them that I shall next turn, and before considering recent novels whose central characters are of the same kind.

*A Secret Alchemy* originated in an earlier recreation of Elizabeth Woodville, in an unpublished novel which I called *A Polished Lamp*. Such a novel combines the historical record, in all its problematic nature, with invented or recreated events. Affective truths, in particular, can often only be inferred or imagined from the record, and the writer's inferences may contradict the accepted interpretations of it; historians have always given Elizabeth Woodville a bad press. The need for ethical principles in inventing is acute, too, since 'honesty and responsibility' must encompass not merely travel times and foodstuffs, but whole, known lives. What may and may not be invented? Which aspects of historical 'truth' do readers most care about? What may be changed to suit the storyteller's purposes?

In discussing the writing of her historical novel *Alias Grace*, based on the true story of the murderer Grace Marks, Margaret Atwood set out her ethics thus:

when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it[...] Also, every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times, however dubious such writing might be; but, in the parts left unexplained – the gaps left unfilled – I was free to invent.<sup>29</sup>

Compared to Grace Marks's, the facts of Elizabeth's life are recorded in only the barest sense, although by the standards of women of the time, Elizabeth's later life as Queen is well documented. That it was so became a handicap: I was not free to invent impossible or even unlikely actions for her. My solution in *A Polished Lamp* was to obey Tremain's Law: I invented a waiting-woman for Elizabeth, and told the story in her first-person voice, thus avoiding imposing thoughts and words on a real historical figure. But as some of my interest in Elizabeth was in how her life was intertwined with political history which I could not evade, writing *A Polished Lamp* often seemed less like a creative re-imagining and more like

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<sup>29</sup> Atwood, 'Writing *Alias Grace*', p.1515.

animating puppets: the crass fictionalising of a bio-pic film. There was also the problem that many of the events in history that a fiction writer might choose to write about are inaccessible through an authentically portrayed *woman's* life. In *A Polished Lamp* I wanted to explore various themes which were important to Elizabeth's story, and my own sense of the presence of the past in the present. As with *A Secret Alchemy*, I therefore threaded in another, modern story to illuminate the themes more clearly, beyond what any single viewpoint in any single narrative could do. *A Polished Lamp* went unpublished, and I went on to write my next novel, also a parallel narrative, which began life as the creative element of my MPhil thesis, *Shadows in the Glass*,<sup>30</sup> but was published as *The Mathematics of Love*.<sup>31</sup> When I came to the novel that would form the bulk of this PhD I therefore felt much more confident in handling a parallel narrative. I decided to write not only Elizabeth, but also her brother Anthony Woodville, who would give me direct access to many more of the great events and debates of the day.

It was fiction such as Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor*<sup>32</sup> which had shown me not just one way of handling parallel narrative, but how fiction set in the past can and must re-invent and re-voice that past, not merely animate it in a voice familiar to modern readers. Meanwhile writers such as Jane Gardam and Angela Carter had shown me the possibilities of writing in very individual, even idiosyncratic, voices and points of view. An omniscient, external narrator has enormous advantages for the novelist, for in such narratives, as Gardner points out, 'the reader escapes the claustrophobia the reader may feel when boxed into a limited opinion'.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand I find that a character-narrator restricts the innumerable possibilities of language and point-of-view to something manageable. It is also liberating since, in a process akin a poet's conforming to an elaborate metrical or rhyme scheme, such restrictions force one to range more widely to find the right words and thoughts. For the reader, too, a well-written narrative voice, whether or not the narrator is also a character, is enormously compelling in the way that a good raconteur is, so that the reader is drawn on even through moments of slackened tension or breaks in the chronology of the novel.

In *A Secret Alchemy* part of my idea was to contrast the practical, political 'professional wife' Elizabeth, good at her job as lady of the manor and then queen, with Anthony's more philosophical and melancholic temperament. This conception of their characters is, of course, a considerable extension beyond the known facts, but it does not

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<sup>30</sup> Emma Darwin, 'Shadows in the Glass' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Glamorgan, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> Emma Darwin, *The Mathematics of Love* (London: Headline Review, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* (London: Abacus, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> Gardner, p.137.

contradict them, even if it contradicts historians' interpretations.<sup>34</sup> It would have been possible to write Elizabeth and Anthony into the same narrative, but if one of them were a character-narrator, then the other's character and experience would be seen and heard only through that narration. On the other hand an external narrator would limit how much I could develop their individual voices, however much I made use of free indirect discourse.<sup>35</sup> I decided I would write their two strands separately, relying on the reader to read them together into a single narrative of their times. I would then use the third, modern strand to echo the central ideas, and make clear any historical or thematic material which casting Anthony and Elizabeth as narrators debarred me from making clear in their own.

Anthony's was the first narrative to be established. In research I had discovered that shortly before his execution he had been transferred from Sheriff Hutton to Pontefract Castle and I decided that the journey could be the form and frame for his whole strand of the novel. It would be natural to reflect on the events of his life which had brought him to this state, and I could then include more self-contained, flashback episodes that together would make up a picture of his life: 'now' gives rise to 'then', which in turn explains 'now'. And since pilgrimages were central to most people's experience at this date – even what we would call crusades were pilgrimages – Anthony would also, naturally, see this journey as a kind of pilgrimage.

The modern strand, I decided, would echo the mystery of the Princes in the Tower: a mystery and a disappearance in Una's past has affected her whole life and, in finally solving the mystery, her life is healed. She would illuminate the ideas and images that were beginning to collect about the other central characters: pilgrimage, storytelling, books and printing, the pain of unsolved mysteries and unresolved grief. I could use her most naturally to convey necessary historical information, I realised, if I made her some kind of curator or perhaps a historian. Una's world would be entirely invented, and could be shaped to fit my purposes but that did not exempt me from giving her story its own coherence: a 'now' and a 'then'. I would also be depending on her story's narrative drive to overcome the built-in problem of Elizabeth and Anthony's story having, for at least some readers, a known and tragic outcome.

When it came to Elizabeth's narrative I decided that two threads built from both

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<sup>34</sup> Since my first recreation of Elizabeth in *A Polished Lamp*, two biographies had been published, one of which, Okerlund's *Elizabeth Woodville: Slandered Queen*, is decidedly revisionist, and supported my longstanding reaction against the conventional analysis of Elizabeth's character and actions, as set out in such standard works as Charles Ross's *Edward IV*.

<sup>35</sup> *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theories*, ed. by J. A. Cullen, rev. by C. E. Preston, (London: Penguin 1999), defines free indirect discourse/style as 'The presentation of thoughts or speech of fictional characters which seems by various devices to combine the character's sentiments with those of a narrator'. I use 'free indirect discourse' as a general description of a novel's method, and 'free indirect style' for particular textual examples.

‘now’ and ‘then’ was probably as much complication as the reader could bear, and that hers should have a straightforward beginning-middle-and-end structure. This would also provide a firm framework to anchor Anthony’s more fragmented retellings and reflect my conception of Elizabeth’s practical, pragmatic character.

It will be obvious that by this time Elizabeth and Anthony’s characters, if not the events of their lives, were beginning to develop beyond the historical record. But particularly in Elizabeth’s case I was still worried about how to get away from a sense of animated puppets. Early in *A Polished Lamp* I had made modern-day historian Una think:

Yes, I can deduce, within the bounds of scholarly tentativeness, why she did things: contemporaries have left their views. But what did she think about? What did she see, when she closed her eyes at night? *Elysabeth*, she signed herself, Elysabeth, who could look at her hand writing her name as I look at mine, or palm up, her life in the space she cupped; who might wake at night and hear the blood drumming in her ears as I do; feel stubble scratch her ankles in the Northamptonshire fields; smell lavender in the garden, or the stench of London creeping in at the narrow windows of the Tower. And there are things still further beyond the historian’s reach. What about the sale of a small son? A brother, kneeling to accept death? The taste of a King’s skin?

From this had come the idea that *A Secret Alchemy* would be formed round Una’s discovery that she could only know these things by writing fiction. But merely supplying the sensory and affective content that historians, if not always biographers, must exclude, was not going to be enough. How could I make my novel fictive in form as well as content, in its access to individual consciousness while keeping the reader clear with the necessary facts, and also providing enough narrative drive to keep them reading?

The answer arrived in a review of two major books about the Dark Ages in *The Times Literary Supplement*. The reviewer R. I. Moore described how

‘[h]istorians have to live with Heisenbergian uncertainty: they cannot simultaneously plot position and trajectory without distortion. The forces that make for change are always more important for the future, and therefore in retrospect, than they seem at the time’.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, the more clearly the writer expresses the narrative shape of a whole life or era, the less well they will be representing the actual moment-by-moment nature of existence.<sup>37</sup> It then occurred to me that a pilgrimage, too, is both a journey and a series of experiences, but cannot be experienced as both at once, or if it is, that experience is of a paradox which in itself has something mystical about it. I would choose (or invent) episodes in Elizabeth’s and Anthony’s lives which embodied the nature of their lives, but each would

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<sup>36</sup> R. I. Moore, ‘A lesson of No End’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17th February 2006, p.4.

be told as Elizabeth or Anthony experienced them; a relatively self-contained event lived as it happened, shaped by the past but ignorant of the future; an event which, for the reader, measured Elizabeth and Anthony's individual positions at that time without succumbing to a premature expression of their trajectory. Thus I could free myself from a conventional, continuous, biographical narrative of their lives. Una's strand, on the other hand, would cover a short span of time in a continuous trajectory of 'now' like Anthony's, but whereas his strand forms the frame for a narrative of his life as he knowingly approaches death, hers would be more than a frame, because it would be recalling 'now' the mystery 'then' in order to resolve it.

The form of *A Secret Alchemy* was the result of the particular challenges which I encountered in basing fiction on recorded historical figures. Other novelists have found other solutions to such challenges, and in discussing how they have done so, Turner's taxonomy is useful.<sup>38</sup> He distinguishes between wholly 'invented' fiction, where no principal actors or events are taken from the historical record; 'disguised' versions of the historical record, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which are based on the record but, because of their disguise, are free to abandon it at will; and 'documented' novels, such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, and Susan Sontag's story of Emma Hamilton, *The Volcano Lover*, whose main purpose is to animate *and extend* the historical record using fictional techniques.

At what one might call the extreme 'documented' end of the fictional spectrum are such works as Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark*, retitled *Schindler's List* for the American market and for the Spielberg film. The US edition was classed as a 'non-fiction novel', which reflects Keneally's own description of its 'genre uncertainty'<sup>39</sup> as a 'quasi-novel' (p.196). In Britain this category did not exist (although 'creative non-fiction' has since established itself as a genre) and it was sold as a novel. It won the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1982 but the question has been raised, as Sue Vice describes in her study, *Holocaust Fiction*, whether it should have been eligible.<sup>40</sup> An Author's Note at the beginning of British editions of the book makes the relationship of this novel to the record, apparently, plain. The Note ends with a reproduction of the author's signature, as if it carries the authority of an affidavit, and it defends his chosen method:

To use the texture and devices of a novel to tell a true story is a course which has frequently been followed in modern writing. It is the one I have chosen to follow here:

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<sup>37</sup> In *A Secret Alchemy* this idea is most clearly articulated in Fergus's speech, which I quoted in the Introduction. At one point I even considered changing the title to *The Heisenberg Pilgrimage* for this reason.

<sup>38</sup> Turner, p.337-9.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Keneally, *Searching for Schindler* (London: Sceptre, 2008), p.194.

<sup>40</sup> Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2000), p.90-116.

both because the craft of the novelist is the only craft to which I can lay claim, and because the novel's techniques seem suited for a character of such ambiguity and magnitude as Oskar [Schindler]. I have attempted to avoid all fiction, though, since fiction would debase the record, and to distinguish between reality and the myths which are likely to attach themselves to a man of Oskar's stature. Sometimes it has been necessary to attempt to reconstruct conversations of which Oskar and others have left only the briefest record. But most exchanges and conversations, and all events, are based on the detailed recollections of [those concerned]<sup>41</sup>

This note would have a very different effect on the reader's response to the narrative had it come at the end of the novel. Vice points out that the change of title, from *Ark* to *List*, shifts the book's focus from metaphor and biblical parallel to fact and the material record.<sup>42</sup> Certainly Keneally's plainly-voiced, omniscient narrative, full of dates and baldly, even awkwardly, conveyed background information, seems expressly designed to fend off any accusations of fictionalising. Yet Keneally does not distinguish in the text between the 'texture and devices of a novel' – the small details of dress, food or affect which are presumably invented even if big ones are not – and the 'record', nor does he tell us where the dividing line is between what he felt able to invent and what he did not. Indeed, his decision to write the story as a novel because 'paradox is beloved of novelists'<sup>43</sup> carries with it the implication that the novelist's job *is* to go beyond the record: to resolve paradoxes which historians cannot. Indeed, how could he make that dividing line clear when, as Turner points out, generally speaking historical fiction relies on 'novelistic forms that can loosely be termed realistic – avoiding, that is, anything that might draw attention to the fact that they are not history but fiction'?<sup>44</sup> Keneally may claim the ethical high ground by refusing to 'debase' the record with fiction, but casting the story in fictional form entails *not* revealing to the reader how his ethical distinctions operate in practice.

Such nervousness about invention on any large scale is perhaps understandable when dealing with living memories of the Holocaust. In a similar spirit Helen Dunmore has spoken of her extreme care, in writing her novel *The Siege* about the siege of Leningrad, to be faithful to the memories of survivors she had actually met and talked to: 'They have a right to it. I don't believe we have the right to say, "I will do what I like with this material"'.<sup>45</sup> In conversation with her and Dutch novelist Anna Enquist, however, novelist Michel Faber described how he feels 'uneasy' about the distinction between 'real facts and stories, because everything is a story. You are looking at this vast array of detail and editing it down to something we can understand'. For related reasons, in the Foreword to *Beloved*,

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's Ark*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982), p.9.

<sup>42</sup> Vice, p.91.

<sup>43</sup> Keneally, *Searching for Schindler*, p.26.

<sup>44</sup> Turner, p.345.

Toni Morrison implies her own ethical limits on using real people, in explaining her decision to tell the true story of Margaret Garner, and the broader experience of slavery, through her fictional character Sethe. To Morrison the former 'is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes'.<sup>46</sup> In interview four years later she made this implication explicit and general, and made a case for the 'disguised' novel on the grounds of ethics, as well as creative possibility:

Making a little life for oneself by scavenging other people's lives is a big question, and it does have moral and ethical implications.

In fiction I feel the most intelligent, and the most free, and the most excited, when my characters are fully invented people. If they're based on somebody else, in a funny way it's an infringement of a copyright. That person owns his life, has a patent on it. It shouldn't be available for fiction.<sup>47</sup>

Discussing his novel *Arthur and George*,<sup>48</sup> about the real-life miscarriage of justice which Arthur Conan Doyle investigated, the novelist and journalist Julian Barnes expressed the relationship of history to his fiction in more detail than Thomas Keneally's Author's Note. In conversation with Blake Morrison,<sup>49</sup> he described how the 'true story' which interested him became a novel, because no factual account could combine the many layers he saw in it: a crime story, a story of a particular episode in the emotional life of Conan Doyle, and of the religious temper of the times, including Conan Doyle's interest in spiritualism, although 'the case is what keeps it going at the primary narrative level'. He also wanted to write a page-turner but

not a historical novel: [rather] a contemporary novel which happens to happen a hundred years ago[...]. It depends what your path is to the reader. A historical novel is trying to put the reader back in that time, with all the furniture and fittings of the time. I wanted the reader to be in the 21st Century.

There is almost no historical material about George Edalji, the victim of the miscarriage of justice, and about the crimes and trial itself the record is contradictory. In Blake Morrison's words, Barnes 'wrote about this case because [he] couldn't read about it'. Barnes feels that, on the other hand, Conan Doyle himself is almost 'too well known', since his feeling that he 'didn't want to fiddle[...] with the irreducible facts of the case', denied him the freedom 'to have invented more'. Clearly there are bi-axial tensions in Turner's

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<sup>45</sup> Helen Dunmore in conversation with Michel Faber and Anna Enquist, 'Stop the Clock: the Writer's Perception of Time', Purcell Room, London, 14th March 2006.

<sup>46</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 2007), p.xi.

<sup>47</sup> 'Toni Morrison', in *Women Writers at Work*, ed. George Plimpton (London: The Harvill Press, 1998), p.299.

<sup>48</sup> Julian Barnes, *Arthur & George* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Julian Barnes, in conversation with Blake Morrison, Richard Hoggart Lecture Series, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 9th November 2005.

documentary novel: the tension between the demands of fact and the demands of storytelling which may 'debase' fact operates, as it were, at right-angles to the tension between the desire to separate facts and fictions clearly, and the desire to integrate them as a wholly 'invented' novel is able to do.

Moreover, perhaps fiction writers feel less inhibited by the historical record when their protagonists are not victims of historical events but powerful actors in it. In her collection of essays about historical fiction, *On Histories and Stories*, novelist and critic A. S. Byatt discusses the difference between Simon Schama's history of the French Revolution, *Citizens*,<sup>50</sup> which countered half a century's history-writing by asserting in lavish detail the importance of the individual as both actor and sufferer in historical processes, and Hilary Mantel's almost equally big realist novel of the lives of Robespierre, d'Anton and Desmoulins, *A Place of Greater Safety*. As Byatt says of Mantel's novel (echoing Morrison on Barnes's), 'It tells what Schama cannot tell, because he cannot know it, although both writers use the same evidence'.<sup>51</sup> Mantel's 'knowledgeable narrator'<sup>52</sup> draws on the actual writings of her characters – not least Robespierre's assertion of 1793 that 'History is fiction'<sup>53</sup> – but eschews a consciously 'period' voice for both narration and dialogue. Using techniques available to the modern writer of fiction (free indirect discourse, shifting tenses, achronological sequencing, playscript) Mantel follows historical events faithfully. But she also reaches outwards from them to recreate voices which are not documented, and to re-imagine both well-known and little known figures in all their individual particularity. These inhabit what Anna Enquist<sup>54</sup> characterised as the 'small white spaces where nothing is known': a description which echoes Toni Morrison's need to find 'imaginative space' by moving on from the historical Margaret Garner, and Barnes's difficulties with Conan Doyle. For Enquist these spaces are the natural habitat of the historical novelist: private loves and hates, dreams, homes, work, wives and children.<sup>55</sup> By contrast, Mantel writes on these spaces to create a more complete picture of an intensely politicised world. One could argue that it is at moments of political instability that there is the most scope for individuals to affect history, and Mantel's d'Anton, Robespierre and Desmoulins are overtly ambitious to make history. But what goes on in the white spaces is just as large a part of what makes them what they are, and what makes them act as they do. For example, d'Anton's death<sup>56</sup> has an

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<sup>50</sup> Simon Schama, *Citizens* (London: Penguin, 1989).

<sup>51</sup> A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p.54.

<sup>52</sup> Byatt seems to prefer this term to the more usual 'omniscient narrator', perhaps because the latter has 'godlike' overtones which seem inappropriate to modern writers working with the conviction that there is no absolute truth.

<sup>53</sup> Hilary Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p.29.

<sup>54</sup> Helen Dunmore, 'Stop the Clock'.

<sup>55</sup> Anna Enquist, 'Stop the Clock'.

<sup>56</sup> Mantel, p.871.

emotional impact which would be hard to evoke or account for in a conventional biography: that it does is the result of Mantel embedding it in the private particularity of a very remarkable individual life and consciousness, which would not have been accessible to us except through fiction. Not the least of the reasons for the novel's success is that it is precisely this integration of private and public existence that makes the reader feel most acutely how historical processes *cannot* be controlled by even its most powerful actors, who may well become its victims in their turn.

To tell the story of those real-historical characters and their acts Mantel, as Byatt points out<sup>57</sup>, controls and forms her narrative by developing the nineteenth century realism of George Eliot in fruitful ways. In this passage Byatt is defending the knowledgeable, omniscient third-person narrator, and in doing so echoes Gardner's assertion that it 'rise[s] above the pettiness and unseemly familiarity of third person subjective, and avoid[s] the savage sparsity of third person objective'.<sup>58</sup> But this seems to me unfair to other kinds of narration. For example, Robert Nye's novel of Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Voyage of the Destiny*, is cast in the form of Raleigh's apologia.<sup>59</sup> Raleigh writes to his younger son and his wife Bess from the disastrous expedition to El Dorado. Under the influence of fever which comes and goes, and grief at his older son's death in the expedition he was himself too ill to lead, Raleigh's narration moves forwards and backwards in the story of his life in an almost hallucinatory way, seemingly though not actually at random. As the expedition collapses and Raleigh sails home to renewed imprisonment and certain death, what we learn about his past and his present is in fact carefully controlled and paced. Raleigh's voice evokes the density and vividness of seventeenth century prose, with its easy mixing of science, religion and philosophy, without ever attempting ventriloquism or pastiche. Nye's Raleigh is, in the term that the critic John Mullan uses in *How Novels Work*, an 'inadequate narrator': one whose narrative 'requires the reader to supply what the narrator cannot understand'.<sup>60</sup> But, since the facts of Raleigh's life and milieu are fairly well known, Nye can rely on the reader to make sense of the historical narrative, even when it is presented achronologically, and to be encouraged to measure and enjoy Raleigh's inadequacy. In other words, the tension between fact and invention is part of the pleasure of reading the novel as a whole. Although Anthony Woodville is a much less well known figure than Raleigh I, too, have relied to some extent on the reader's knowledge of at least Richard III both to 'colour in' the background to the story, and to be intrigued and challenged by the rather different story which I have elaborated.

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<sup>57</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p.55.

<sup>58</sup> Gardner, p.157.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Nye, *Voyage of the Destiny* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

<sup>60</sup> John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.50.

By contrast, and perhaps because she is basing her novel not only on an ancient ‘true story’ which already has an air of myth about it, but also on an earlier telling of that story, Jill Paton Walsh explicitly takes up an intermediate position, between Mantel and Keneally, in her Author’s Note to *Knowledge of Angels*, and makes it very clear how the reader should go about understanding her project:

This story is based very remotely on the true story of the Maid of Chalons – *vide* Rousseau, *Epitre II sur L’Homme*.

It is set on an island somewhat like Mallorca, but not Mallorca, at a time somewhat like 1450, but not 1450. A fiction is always, however obliquely, about the time and place in which it is written.<sup>61</sup>

The point here is clearly not that Paton Walsh is expecting all her readers to know the facts of the Maid of Chalons or Rousseau’s version of them, or that she is trying to say anything directly about those facts, but that she still wants the reader to know that her fiction is tethered to them, however loosely, while also speaking, ‘however obliquely’, of the modern world.

This question of the reader bringing their own knowledge of history to their reading separates *The Voyage of the Destiny* from a novel like Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*. By Turner’s categories, *Hawksmoor* is ‘disguised’ fiction, in that Hawksmoor’s churches are attributed to a fictional architect, Nicholas Dyer, while it is the modern detective, charged with solving a series of present-day murders in those churches, who is named Hawksmoor. But as a whole the novel might almost come into Turner’s category of ‘invented’ fictions, in that it does not *encourage* the reader to map what is narrated onto what they know of the historical fact. The baroque, fantastical quality of *Hawksmoor*, which is at least partly a ghost story, at times floats free of the record altogether. Ackroyd even asserts as much: he places his Acknowledgements at the beginning of the book, as Keneally does his Author’s Note, but his assertion is precisely opposite: ‘Any relation to real people, either living or dead, is entirely coincidental. I have employed many sources in the preparation of *Hawksmoor*, but this version of history is my own invention’.<sup>62</sup> Despite this, in calling the novel ‘this version of history’, not ‘this fiction’, Ackroyd claims a place for it on the same spectrum of historical narrative as his sources.

As Mantel and the others quoted above imply, consciously or unconsciously every historical novelist must work out some principles on which to work, so that they do not break Gardner’s ‘fundamental contract’ of honesty and responsibility, on which the fictional dream depends, either by being clearly incorrect, or by departing so wholly from the readers’ contemporary experience (including their idea of history) that the dream, however factually

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<sup>61</sup> Jill Paton Walsh, *Knowledge of Angels* (Cambridge: Green Bay Publications, 1994), p.x.

correct, is broken anyway. But even with real historical figures whose voices were dominant in their own time there is more than one way of being faithful to the historical record. Georgette Heyer's factual accuracy is well documented<sup>63</sup> but, as she makes clear in a rare Author's Note at the beginning of her novel of Waterloo *An Infamous Army*, even she considered that fidelity to voice and character may be more important – and more effective – than mere fidelity to the material record:

Wherever possible, I have allowed the Duke [of Wellington] to speak for himself, borrowing freely from[...] his Despatches. If it should be objected that I should not have made him say in 1815 what he wrote in 1808, or said many years after Waterloo, I can only hope that, since his own words, whether spoken or written, were so infinitely superior to any which I could have put into his mouth, I may be pardoned for the occasional chronological inexactitudes thus entailed.<sup>64</sup>

Picking up a handful of recent historical novels in a bookshop will show that historical notes, lists of further reading or actual sources, *de rigueur* in non-fiction, seem increasingly present in fiction. This suggests that writers and readers are uneasy about using a literary form that mimics historicity while implying, as Turner puts it, a 'fundamental discontinuity between the novel and recorded history',<sup>65</sup> and feel the need of some kind of explicit statement about the relationship between the two in any particular example. But the trend towards giving fiction the scholarly apparatus of non-fiction, which *seems* to reinforce the authenticity of a novel, to my mind actually undermines its effectiveness and therefore status as art. In *How Novels Work* John Mullan argues similarly:

As fiction usurps the province of biography, however, it risks condemning itself to a kind of triviality. The more it stacks up its evidence, its sources, its academic credentials, the more it confesses to a secondary status – something perhaps more entertaining than the truth, but something less than the truth too.<sup>66</sup>

I have been exploring some of the problems which confront writers in using real historical events and figures: the problematic nature of the historical record and therefore of fiction which is based on it; the often tacit contract between writer and reader as to how that record may be used, ignored or contradicted; the ethics and practicalities of using real

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<sup>62</sup> Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*, precedes p.1

<sup>63</sup> Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Private World of Georgette Heyer* (London: The Bodley Head, 1984), p.71.

<sup>64</sup> Georgette Heyer, *An Infamous Army* (London, Pan Books, 1961), p.5.

<sup>65</sup> Turner, p.341.

<sup>66</sup> Mullan, p.83. Mullan's argument, that slavish adherence to non-fictional sources undermines the creative power and autonomy of fiction for the reader, extends to the issue of artistic practice. I know from my own experience that I rarely write well when working directly from reference works, and must instead internalise the information they present, before recreating it on my pages. To my mind it is no coincidence that the least successful section of *Atonement*, set in St Thomas's Hospital during World War Two, all but sinks under undigested historical information. One possible reason for this was revealed when McEwan acknowledged that his chief source for this section was a memoir with the same setting, Lucilla Andrews' *No Time for Romance*.

figures to fictional ends; and the ways in which writers have engaged with or circumvented these issues. I shall be returning to this question of how historical fiction works as storytelling more fully in Chapter Four, but first I shall look at how I, and other writers, have tried to turn history of all kinds into fiction by using a particular technique: the parallel narrative.

## Two

# PARALLEL NARRATIVE

For the purpose of this commentary, I define a parallel narrative novel as one which tells two or more stories, concerning two or more separate casts of characters, in more-or-less separate settings: in the context of historical fiction this implies that at least one of those stories is set in a time before the writer's birth. Usually sections of the different stories alternate in a regular or variable sequence; occasionally, as in Iain Pears's *An Instance of the Fingerpost*,<sup>67</sup> whole narratives are simply given one after the other. This working definition may be tested by asking of a particular novel whether the separate sections of any single narrative strand, reassembled, would make basic narrative sense and more or less stand as complete stories on their own.

The creative writing vocabulary of flashbacks and tenses, omniscient and character narrators can be made more precise with terms borrowed from Narratology, for example as set out by Mieke Bal in *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*.<sup>68</sup> Bal combines the three aspects of storytelling, 'fabula', 'story' and 'text',<sup>69</sup> with the more self-explanatory concepts of focalisation, and external, internal and character-bound narrators, to set out an analytical framework for these issues. Thus, in narratological terms the single text of *A Secret Alchemy* is constructed by three character-bound narrators, who alternately narrate three discrete stories of roughly equal length, focalised consistently through themselves. One might also argue that Elizabeth and Anthony's two stories both derive from a single fabula. There is no external narrator in the novel, except to the degree that Una, in explaining some parts of Elizabeth and Antony's fabula in her own story, operates as an external narrator and a different focaliser of theirs, not embedded in their text. Only in Bal's refusal to consider first and third-person narratives as in any way different from each other<sup>70</sup> does the creative writer part company with her. As Dorrit Cohn observes in *Transparent Minds*, which explores the presentation of consciousness in fiction, there is 'a profound change in narrative climate as one moves between the two territories[...] It stems from the altered relationship between the narrator and his protagonist when that protagonist is his own past self'.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Iain Pears, *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (London: Vintage, 1998).

<sup>68</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p.5.

<sup>69</sup> As Bal uses them (p.5) 'fabula' is the 'series of logically and chronologically related events', for example the generally accepted tale of Tom Thumb, whereas a 'story' is that fabula 'presented in a certain manner' in a particular retelling, and 'text' the actual form of words that retelling takes.

<sup>70</sup> Bal, p.21.

<sup>71</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p.15.

Gardner's concept of the psychic distance, 'the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story'<sup>72</sup> is also useful, in that it is controlled by how the relationship of narrator to character affects the voice. I have extended Gardner's term to coin the term 'psychic range', since most narratives move between different distances.

A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession* influenced *A Secret Alchemy* in many ways, but in studying it for my MPhil<sup>73</sup> I had been surprised to find almost no critical discussion of *how* Byatt structures the many layers and elements of her text to tell several stories. The novel is an external narration of the story of Roland and Maud, modern literary scholars specialising respectively in two Victorian poets, Ash and LaMotte. Roland and Maud meet when Roland discovers a draft of a letter which suggests that Ash and LaMotte once met. Embedded in the novel are unchronologically arranged letters, diaries, poems, stories, biographies and literary criticism, some presented as physical objects in the narrative, others freestanding, which together 'tell' the love story of Ash and LaMotte. These elements – the documents – are so diverse in their nature and fragmented and partial in their presentation that in Bal's terminology Ash and LaMotte's *story* can hardly be said to exist, and part of the reader's work is to reassemble the fabula. So, whereas in *A Secret Alchemy* the different narratives ask for roughly equal amounts of the reader's effort and attention in understanding the story, this is not true of *Possession*: the modern story, though easier to follow, is infinitely less compelling. This is partly the result of Maud and Roland's multiplicity of functions: they are the reader's representatives in understanding Ash and LaMotte, and in the complicated modern plot; and they embody one of Byatt's main purposes, which is to set out an argument about the relationship of literary theory to the texts on which it works and to the humans who create those texts. When towards the end of the novel literary critic Roland finds himself writing poetry, he realises that

[h]e had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself.

He thought about the death mask [of Ash]. He could and could not say that the mask and the man were dead. What had happened to him was that the ways in which it *could* be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not.<sup>74</sup>

In her study of Byatt's work, the critic Christien Franken relates that

The interviewee Byatt agrees with critics that there is a qualitative difference between the nineteenth and twentieth-century plot in *Possession*[...]. The nineteenth-century

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<sup>72</sup> Gardner, p.111.

<sup>73</sup> Emma Darwin, 'Reading, Writing and Desire in A S Byatt's *Possession*', in 'Shadows in the Glass' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Glamorgan, 2005), pp.359-408.

<sup>74</sup> A. S. Byatt, *Possession* (London: Vintage, 1991), p.473.

story about the two poets[...] is meant to be more vivid aesthetically than the plot which contains the two scholars[...] ‘to challenge the modern view of Victorian poets as dead, boring, respectable figures’. She needed[...] Ash and LaMotte ‘to be terribly urgent, interesting and complicated’.<sup>75</sup>

In other words, Byatt made a conscious choice to allow herself and the reader to be bored by Maud and Roland. Not only does she argue for the inadequacy of the idea that language only speaks ‘of itself’, she has also declared that she is also standing out ‘against the notion that it may not be possible to read the Victorians as themselves, but always and only our own idea of them’.<sup>76</sup> Byatt is trying to create the reader that she needs for her aesthetic purpose to be not only understood, but experienced.

Byatt is not alone in wanting to control the way in which the reader experiences the text. In his account of writing *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco describes how he too consciously risked the reader’s boredom to create out of actual readers someone who comes close to that literary-theoretical construct, his ‘model reader’, who is close cousin, according to the critic Elizabeth Freund,<sup>77</sup> to Iser’s implied reader, Prince’s narratee, Culler’s ideal reader, and so on:

After reading the manuscript, my friends and editors suggested that I abbreviate the first hundred pages, which they found very difficult and demanding [...]. I insisted, if somebody wanted to enter the abbey and live there for seven days, he had to accept the abbey’s own pace. If he could not, he would never manage to read the whole book. Therefore those first hundred pages are like a penance or an initiation...<sup>78</sup>

It was not boredom that was at issue when my editor asked for a new opening to *Secret Alchemy* that would help readers to ‘tune in’ to the kind of novel they were reading, but the principle is the same, and the Prologue was the result.

Having used a knowledgeable, external narrator to tell the story of Maud and Roland, and only character-bound, self-conscious narrators, such as diarists and letter-writers, in the nineteenth century fabula, at three points *Possession* gives the reader direct access, by an external narrator, to the nineteenth-century characters. Each case is without diversions or non-narrative comments, and focalised solely through a single character.<sup>79</sup> In Byatt’s view,

[t]his kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and the inner life of

<sup>75</sup> Christien Franken, *A. S. Byatt: Art, Authorship, Creativity* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001), p.87.

<sup>76</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p.46.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism* (London: Methuen 1987), p.7.

<sup>78</sup> Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg 1983), p.41.

<sup>79</sup> Ash and LaMotte’s elopement (p.273); Ellen Ash after his death (p.446), and Ash meeting his daughter (p.508).

characters – as well as providing a Greek chorus – than any first-person mimicry. In *Possession* I used this kind of narrator[...] always to tell what the historians and biographers never discovered, always to heighten the reader's imaginative entry into the world of the text.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, by maintaining an external narrator but restricting its story to the world of the characters' fabula and Enquist's 'small white spaces where nothing is known', Byatt asserts that there *is* a 'world of the text' into which the reader enters. Byatt's multiplicity of narrative techniques in *Possession* embodies her argument that there is a multiplicity of ways in which the fabulae of her several stories can be said to be *there*, because that, to her, is more interesting than saying that they are not.

It is not only through the structure of her text that Byatt connects the different stories but through chains of ideas and images, such as the one which links Ash, ashplant,<sup>81</sup> Norse myth (p.239), fireplaces (p.356), the Rowan Tree Inn (p.487). LaMotte and her descendant Maud are linked by writing and events to the Melusine myth in a complex pattern of shape-shifting which reflects Melusine's dual aspects as sea-creature and dragon, malevolent monster and bereft mother, and the difference in the fate of the creative, self-determining woman in the mid-nineteenth century and in the twentieth.

Thematic connections between narratives are important and enriching but they are not, it seems, enough for most readers. I realised with *The Mathematics of Love* that readers do not expect a novel to have a parallel narrative. It is, arguably, a fundamental refusal of a basic principle of storytelling, which is that all the elements in a story will relate to each other and to a single fabula, and work together to create Gardner's 'vivid and continuous dream'. Given a parallel narrative text readers have to maintain the dream of each fabula despite the discontinuity of plot in switching to the other story, and simultaneously apprehend the connections – the continuity of ideas – which link the two dreams and so cut across their individual continuity. In *Possession* the relationship of the literary critics to the history they seek to discover is clear to the reader from the beginning – it opens with Roland discovering an unknown letter of Ash's<sup>82</sup> – and the narrative structures underpin this. By contrast, in Tobias Hill's *The Love of Stones* it is much further into the novel before it becomes clear what the different narratives are, and how they are related, and Hill makes relatively little use of documents or other embedded but free-standing elements.<sup>83</sup>

Two narratives make up *The Love of Stones*. In the contemporary strand which begins the novel a modern, freelance jewel-dealer, Katharine Sterne, seeks a famous jewel, The Three Brethren. She is the internal, character-bound narrator of her own story in present

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<sup>80</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p.56.

<sup>81</sup> Byatt, *Possession*, p.509.

<sup>82</sup> Byatt, *Possession*, p.1.

tense with frequent past-tense retroversions. Some of these are in Bal's sense complete – a historical episode in the history of the Three Brethren – while more are incomplete, being another scrap of the story of her quest. Katharine's narration never contains anticipations; her future is blank, while the fragmented telling of her own past reinforces our sense of her damaged childhood, which gave way to the obsession which is the only constant in her peripatetic existence. Hill makes much use of the habitual present tense, which stylistically connects the historical past to Sterne's own habitual, futureless present:

When Elizabeth gained it, the Three Brethren was a hundred and fifty years old. It took this time, five generations, before a woman owned the jewel[...] It seems to me that the character of the Three Brethren is masculine. The shoulder-knot of a cloak, worn for battle[...] It is beautiful in the half-ugly way that certain men are beautiful[...]

The hotels I live in are always cheap. In their plain rooms I never oversleep. These are the advantages of my habits[...] At eight I put on a gym shirt and a pair of chinos and go downstairs to pay for another day. (pp.40-41)

Chapter One ends by evoking the sound of windscreen wipers as she embarks on the second stage of her quest:

Hush  
Hush  
Hush. (p.60)

Chapter Two opens with the same sound repeated, but a series of entirely different narrative devices:

*Hush* was the sound of the river rising. Years later, when he came back to Iraq, Daniel found that this was what had stayed with him. (p.63)

Iraq. It was an Arab name, descended from the Persian[...]  
There had been no 1820. Daniel remembered knowing the year by other measures. 1820 had been 1198 by the Muslim count. (p.66)

In this second narrative strand Daniel is immediately established as a character-bound focaliser, with a clearly-signalled anticipation ('Years later') which although technically embedded in the primary narrative of the two brothers Daniel and Salman Levy, forms what most readers would perceive as a frame for a story which then moves backwards to start in Baghdad in 1820. This story progresses more-or-less chronologically, alternating with Katharine's narrative. There are fleeting anticipations throughout, reminding the reader that Salman becomes deranged and they return eventually to Iraq. The narrator is external but its narration is usually though not always focalised through Daniel or Salman, although

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<sup>83</sup> Tobias Hill, *The Love of Stones* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

less often the latter as he begins to lose his mind.

The links are not only made by the story of the jewel. The name 'Three Brethren' seems to ask that the reader identifies a third brother, and certainly Katharine as written does not seem particularly female. More elaborately, the relationship of humans to precious stones is the chief structuring theme, and connects the narratives. The epigraph, from Camus' 'The Myth of Sisyphus', makes this plain: 'The face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself'. The first contemporary scene begins with dialogue – 'They say that God made men from clots of blood' (p.8) – and later in the scene, when Katharine is offered a diamond which purports to be the the heart of the Three Brethren, it is with her body that she judges it (p.12). Throughout the book the desire for precious stones is connected with sexual desire. When the Levy's jeweller's shop in London is robbed their landlady, whom Salman loves, tells them to leave. Salman's obsession with jewels then grows to blot out everything else, just as Katharine's quest has taken the place of any long-lasting relationships. This theme becomes structural in the central section of Katharine's story in a dependent but frictive relationship with a jewel-collector, whose name Glött connects her with the blood clot which killed Katharine's own loving but elusive mother: 'In the clear liquid it hangs like a jewel' (p.189). At the end of the novel Katharine is told the story of Salman and Daniel, and that Daniel destroyed the jewel; narrator-Katharine, the reader realises, knew all along. But, whereas in *A Secret Alchemy* I made Una's connection with the story of Elizabeth and Anthony retrospectively explicit, in that she will write/has written the novel, here there is no explicit statement that Katharine is the external narrator of the Levy's story as well as her own.

A theme of Hill's novel, which narrates chronological events so achronologically, is the way that precious stones transcend human time, even human existence. As Katharine says, 'my life is part of the story of the Three Brethren, not the other way round' (p.53). When the Levys break open the jar and find the great diamond which was the jewel's heart, Daniel feels that, 'it was old in a way Ibrahim's jar was not, although the vessel had been dull with age, and the jewel looked as if it had been cut yesterday' (p.118). This echoes Maud's comment in *Possession* on LaMotte's now renovated cottage: 'It would have looked older. When it was younger'.<sup>84</sup> And since stones transcend time they also erase it:

But now the story is moving ahead of itself. Its time works in complex ways. It folds back on itself and repeats, or years contract to a scale that seems barely human. Less animal than mineral.<sup>85</sup>

It seems that, if the writer must establish the structure of the novel during the

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<sup>84</sup> Byatt, *Possession*, p.211.

<sup>85</sup> Hill, p.237.

process of writing it, for the reader the structure of the novel comes to embody the journey through time of the protagonists. In *A Secret Alchemy*, as in *Possession* and *The Love of Stones*, this embodiment includes the structural as well as narrative resolution of the main story, so that the different times in which the story takes place are also linked together. Not all parallel narrative novels, of course, deal explicitly with our consciousness of time as a process of itself, as *The Love of Stones* does. But by such means they do embody the relationship of particular lives, and by implication our own lives, to the continuum of history.

The previous chapter discussed the process of working out the different structures of the three narratives in *A Secret Alchemy*, and the practical reasons for writing them in that way. In narratological terms the flashbacks, which are in a storytelling sense the meat of Anthony's story are, in Bal's terms, internal retroversions. The impossibility of altering (Bal's 'determining') the outcome of his story is reflected in the relationship between the two narratives within it: the embedded fabula (the story of his life) explains the primary fabula (the story of the ride), but it does not determine its outcome; his occasional thoughts of escape are without real hope.

Elizabeth is the character-bound narrator of her story: she is also the character-bound focaliser within her narration, and the only achronological elements are the occasional letter or fleeting memory. I particularly wanted the reader to read her story from her point-of-view (in the philosophical as well as the focalising sense); the accounts of the historical Elizabeth as grasping and cold-blooded stem from her enemies, and Tudor historians had no interest in challenging this view. Moreover, since some readers might know the outcome of her fabula, it was important not to anticipate it: in contrast to Anthony there is no sense here of the fabula of her life-story being embedded in a primary fabula – her 'present' at Bermondsey – until the last chapter (p.239). Then the switch to present tense reveals retrospectively that she has, all along, had a present: that without knowing it we have been reading an embedded narrative of her past. This change to present tense also helps to provide consolation for the reader, after the abrupt tragedy of Anthony's death, with some sense of peace and continuing life, including the certain knowledge of the death of the princes. Her life at Bermondsey is written in the habitual present, which becomes historic present when the arrival of Louis (disguised as 'Master Jason') is announced (p.241), then slips back to habitual present, peaceful and continuous, for the last few paragraphs of her narrative.

By contrast, the play of tenses in Una's narrative has the same basic purpose as it does in Anthony's. My use of present tense for their primary narratives (Anthony's ride, Una's return to England), and past tense for the series of retroversions that form their

embedded narratives (Anthony's life, Una's childhood and unrequited love for Mark), reflects these narratological structures, while in a practising novelist's practical terms, using both present and past tenses for the narrative ~~it~~ helps to keep the reader on track. But unlike Anthony's, Una's narrative gives the primary and embedded fabulae more equal importance, since his end is determined (literally and figuratively) and pre-ordained by others, while her purpose in her primary fabula of coming to England – to end her connections with it – is self-determined and therefore open to change. Indeed in her case, in a small way, the embedded fabula *does* determine the outcome of the primary fabula. She renews her old friendship with Mark in saving the Chantry, but when she asks him to stay the night with some hopes of a new beginning, she suddenly perceives their joint past as a story, and his desire for her as a desire for an ending (p.247). My purpose, of course, was to set up suspense by denying the reader's expectations: the union which I had devoted most of both primary and embedded stories to achieving was thwarted, only to be resolved at the last minute by a surprise, positive ending. But I could not have made this conventional pair of narrative twists convincing if the embedded fabula of their joint past had not been shaped as a story which Una (and therefore the reader) could suddenly 'read' in a new way. The second twist occurs when Mark, to whose thoughts we have had no access, reveals that he has, after all, 'read' the primary fabula as a beginning of a new story (p.254).

The form of *A Secret Alchemy*, then, was the outcome of the two central problems that my material and my interest in writing the novel posed. Having done the research I wanted to 'set it aside' as Tremain puts it<sup>86</sup> and re-imagine and re-voice those characters freely, but also bring out themes from it (the point at which 'the novelist in you takes over', as Barnes puts it<sup>87</sup>) which those characters' narratives alone could not. My solution was, literally, to plan in parallel, with the chapters as rows and the 'now' and 'then' of each character as a separate column. Writing in physical parallel, of course, is not possible in prose fiction, and my decision to make two of my three strands very episodic was partly intended to make this switching easier: self-contained episodes reduce the reader's need to keep the details of the plot in mind between them. Since Una is conscious of Elizabeth and Anthony's story I could also use her to hint at thematic connections, as well as supplying some history.

I began by choosing or inventing episodes in Elizabeth's life which seemed pivotal for her and which had dramatic and thematic potential. Anthony is quite well documented in primary sources, but has no authoritative published biography, so his narrative is similarly made of episodes chosen or invented for their potential. It was essential that between them

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<sup>86</sup> Tremain, Richard Hoggart Lecture, 15th October 2008.

<sup>87</sup> Barnes, Richard Hoggart Lecture, 9th November 2005.

the two narratives formed an account of the broader history of the period, with a single, shared chronology. The necessary facts had to be clear, and the arc of the characters' lives and emotional development fully expressed, despite the episodic form, but each episode also had to stand on its own, as it were, as a stage on the pilgrimage – a Station of the Cross – and not sink under the weight of a too conscientiously history-telling narrative.

This set the overall shape of the novel, with Una's sections fitting in the middle of each chapter, between Elizabeth and Anthony. Which of these two came first depended largely on the chronology of the events they described, although I also sometimes made use of the extra emphasis, the weightier pause, that a chapter-end can give. For example, Part Two, subtitled 'Middle', covers Chapters Four to Six (pp.73-146). It opens with Anthony riding over Towton battlefield (p.74) and recalling his encounter with Malory, then the change of allegiance and the reversal of fortune which it brought to the endangered Woodville family 'business' (p.80). This is followed by Una realising just how far downhill the Chantry family business has gone in the absence of an heir for Gareth, and ends with the reappearance of Mark, the lost heir (p.87). Edward's courtship of Elizabeth follows, which is driven by his desire for her but in which I also seeded the basis of a convincing partnership in the family business of ruling and producing heirs (p.93), and her sexual power over him (p.99). Chapter Five continues the story of the marriage, when her partnership with Edward is well-established but he is neglecting business (p.103); it ends with her, pregnant – perhaps with an heir - at Eltham Palace (p.108). The heart of Una's following section is her memory of the moment when she fell in love with Mark (p.114) as Elizabeth did not with Edward, and it is with Mark at Eltham Palace, now being restored, that for the first time she really tries to imagine Elizabeth and Anthony's lives (p.120). Anthony's section (pp.120-3) was written as a 'filler' that would not upset the chronology of the 15th century fabula, after restructuring Elizabeth's strand; it does not advance either past or present plots, but collects together his thoughts about his predicament, establishes his general sexual attraction to men and the power of his enduring love for Louis. Chapter Six opens with the treachery of Edward's brother, the birth of Prince Edward, and then Anthony's falling in love with Louis (pp.126-7). Una's section concerns restoring the past of the Press in the present (p.130-2), which causes the division in *her* family to threaten Mark's plan (p.140), and ends with Gareth's description of his love for Mark, not as a lover (as the the apparent link with Anthony and Louis might suggest) but as a surrogate father: a battle with Izzy is clearly <sup>m</sup>imminent. Part Three ends with Edward's reunion with Elizabeth (pp.143-6) which is no resolution, but the calm before the <sup>m</sup>imminent battle for his throne.

This summary suggests how the different strands not only echo each other thematically within a single chapter, but also drive the narrative across the boundary of each chapter to the next. Since the sequence of sections was variable (except that Una is always in

the middle of each chapter), and in the nature of things Elizabeth's and Anthony's voices are not as immediately distinct from one another as from Una's, I also decided to head each section with the name of the narrator, and a date. In Elizabeth's case this was the usual way of dating, with the regnal year. In Una's it was the day of the week, and in Anthony's the canonical hour of his single day. This emphasised the different timescale and structure of the different narratives, as well as providing fixed points on the novel's temporal map, as it were, for the reader.

The details of themes that link the parallel strands would take a whole novel to describe, so a few examples must suffice. Sibling relationships and uncles as surrogate fathers are perhaps the most obvious themes, together with the linked idea – which is voiced by Una (p.134), Anthony (p.176), Elizabeth (p.195, p.221), and Mark (p.219) – of destroying the thing one loves most in the world. Ideas of storytelling are embedded not only in the titles of the novel's four sections – 'Beginning', 'Middle', 'Middle' and 'End' – but in the idea that a pilgrimage is also a narrative structure (p.214), and the ambiguity of Una and Mark's present relationship: is it an end, or a beginning? Looking for stories to add colour and texture to my storytelling theme proved to be very fruitful. Jonathan Hughes's book *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy: The Kingship of Edward IV*<sup>88</sup> helped to connect Anthony, Caxton and Malory, although in the event Caxton became less important, while Christina Hardyment's biography of Malory<sup>89</sup> inspired Anthony's encounter with him. This is the reason for the Arthurian names of Una's William-Morris-inspired family. Their surname, Pryor, recalls both the idea of what has come before and, like the other modern surnames, is a medieval 'job' surname – Butler, Stewart (which also has royal implications), Marchant, Fisher – while 'Mark Fisher' recalls the morally ambiguous King Mark in the Tristan legend, and the wounded Fisher King. Significantly, in the younger generation the balanced, self-sufficient Morgan *chose* to call herself after a powerful enchantress (ASA p.110), in contrast to Izzy's daughter Fay's more passive situation as a corporate wife (p.25). Hughes's book also inspired the recurring metaphor of the alchemical marriage between light/dark, sun/moon, gold/silver, red/white. The 'secret' of the title is the fact that the most important couplings are secret: Elizabeth and Edward are married in secret, Una's love for Mark is secret, as is Anthony and Louis's. To reinforce this all the couples in the story are light/dark pairs: this needed a little finessing at various points, such as casting the blond Edward IV as red-gold, so that the also blonde Elizabeth could be silver-gilt. Having cast the Pryor family as dark, so that Una could be dark to Mark's fair, I had to make Morgan very dark indeed,

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<sup>88</sup> Jonathan Hughes, *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy: The Kingship of Edward IV* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2002).

<sup>89</sup> Christina Hardyment, *Malory: The Life and Times of King Arthur's Chronicler* (London: Harper Collins, 2005).

and vividly coloured, to contrast her with Fergus's black hair but pale skin (p.214).

The Arthurian ideas were central to my early thinking about the book, but it is characteristic of how novels evolve that I found parts of the Jason myth – which I researched originally for the notion of journeying – recurring more often. The notion of the Golden Fleece as a talisman for a harmonious kingdom became important too, and realising this, I used the different parts of the myth at various points: I gave Anthony and Louis (and ultimately Elizabeth) another talisman in the form of the Jason ring (p128), recalled Jason's death under his own keel Dodona ('God-given') for Anthony's last hours (p.203), made young Prince Edward read of the dragon's teeth in a book printed by Caxton (p.161), made the story of Jason's fostering by a centaur be Gareth's current printing project (and connected it fleetingly to the Bayeux Tapestry as another exercise in royal myth-making) (p.111), and was extremely pleased to discover that the historical Elizabeth,<sup>90</sup> in her refusal to give up the young Richard Duke of York, really was compared by Richard of Gloucester and the council to Medea (ASA p.195). I also brought in the Melusine myth which I had first encountered in *Possession*, since Elizabeth claimed descent from her through her mother Jacquetta de St Pol. Finally, in choosing a name for the Press I came across the mythical Icelandic figures of Sol and Mani, who as well as being brother and sister to echo Anthony and Elizabeth, and Izzy and Lionel, reversed the usual identification, since Sol is the woman. It also touched on another European myth to go with the Arthurian, Greek and French myths that I had already woven in.

While some of these references (particularly the Jason ring) have a structural function, others do not. There is no serious storytelling purpose to making Una (p.237) link the imprisoned Raleigh's *History of the World*, which is the source of the epigraph to Part Three (p.72) with the imprisoned Malory's *Morte Darthur*, although I had planned from the beginning to bring Anthony and Malory together; such things are simply there to increase the sense of the constants, within historical change, of human behaviour

In discussing the process of developing and constructing the parallel narrative structure of *A Secret Alchemy* I have been exploring how it and other novels work in both the structure of individual narratives, and in how they alternate and interact with each other, bringing out connections and contrasts of character and theme, using links between plot, documents, themes and images. But so far I have scarcely touched on one of the most important ways which which the text embodies the history and imagined human life: voice. For example, one hint – it is little more <sup>in *The Love of Stones*</sup> that Katharine might be the narrator of the Levy's story, is a certain similarity between the narrative voices of the two narrations, despite their being set

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<sup>90</sup> Arlene Okerlund, *Elizabeth Wydeville, The Slandered Queen* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005), p.217.

in different times and being focalised through different characters. Decisions about voice are crucial for any novelist, but the voicing of historical fiction presents particular challenges and opportunities in practice, and it is to these that I now turn.

## Three

# VOICE

In creative writing the term ‘voice’ encompasses more than speech. As well as writing convincingly characterised dialogue, the writer must find a narrative voice for the piece as a whole. As Bakhtin puts it,

For the prose artist the world is full of other people’s words, among which he must orient himself...He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed.<sup>91</sup>

In other words, a writer must make a particular synthesis of ‘other people’s’ words, with his or her own. In historical fiction some of those others’ words will be modern and some from history, and some will come from other modern writers’ engagement with historical words. The balance of ‘own’ and all the different ‘others’ is the outcome of decisions, which must be made at the beginning, about narrator (external or internal), point-of-view, first or third person, tone, style and language. Critic and novelist David Lodge describes the relationship thus:

Some of the crucial decisions by which a narrative is produced, such as the writer’s choice of narrative point of view, or the treatment of time, are in a sense made prior to, or at a deeper level than, the articulation of the text in a sequence of sentences.<sup>92</sup>

These decisions are examples of Sennet’s process of problem finding, which he sees as central to the nature of craftsmanship.<sup>93</sup> Formulating a rational question is one method of problem finding, since the answer may be supplied from the ‘deeper level’ by intuition. In the case of voice, the fundamental questions are: ‘Who is telling this story?’ (external or internal narrator); ‘Where do they stand “now” in relationship to it?’ (focalisation and psychic distance reflecting narrative structure); and ‘Do they have access to others’ thoughts?’ (subjective, objective, knowledgeable or inadequate narrator). The answers determine much of what, in retrospect, would be termed narrative technique. Indeed, voice is, arguably, the chief vehicle of narrative technique at the micro-level since the reader’s experience of the novel is determined by the writer’s choice of which elements of the fabula will be narrated, and in what way.

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<sup>91</sup> Mixail Baxtin (sic), ‘Discourse Typology in Prose’, in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: an Introduction*, ed. by Vassiliss Lambropoulos and David Neal Miller (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987), pp.285-303 (p.310).

<sup>92</sup> David Lodge, ‘Introduction’, in *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.5.

<sup>93</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), p.279.

In a novel with an external narrator the choice of words need not be the result of a positive decision to create a distinct voice for that novel, but simply the outcome of the writer's own 'native' style, 'the plane of his own discourse': only in dialogue and any passages of free indirect style do characters' voices emerge. By contrast, with a character-bound narrator a literally characteristic voice is unavoidable, however neutral-seeming it is, and however little the writer has consciously set out to differentiate that voice from his or her native style. It will be useful here to coin a term for novels (or strands of novels) where the character-narrator's voice is an important part of the overall effect: characterised narrative.

In a characterised narrative the medium is also part of the message, and this fact sets up particular tensions and difficulties. One reason for choosing to write a strongly characterised narrative is to keep the reader alive to the subjectivity of the narrator, and by implication to the possibility of other stories derived from the fabula. If there is more than one character-narrator, it then becomes important to differentiate the narratives clearly from each other, not only to enrich the reader's experience of the text and the characters, but so that the characters' subjectivity is read as their own, not simply as that of the author. There is also the practical necessity of ensuring that readers are never confused, or uncertain – even subliminally – as to whose narrative they are reading at any given moment. While it was not difficult, in *A Secret Alchemy*, to differentiate Una's modern narrative from the fifteenth-century ones, with Elizabeth and Anthony many contrasts were not available to me: their period was the same, their gender was different, but as brother and sister their class was not, and many of the references were also the same.

Then there is the question of whether and to what extent it is desirable, in historical fiction, to develop an authentic-seeming period voice: should the medium embody the message at that level? As Margaret Yourcenar points out,

although we possess an enormous mass of written documents, and also visual documents, from the past, nothing is left to us of *voices* before the... phonograph... What is more... certain great novelists or dramatists of the nineteenth century... were the first to register *conversation* in all its spontaneity, its disjointed logic, its complex byways, its lacunae, and its unarticulated implications without passing through tragic or comic stylization or lyric outburst.<sup>94</sup>

She asserts that in trying to represent speech from a pre-19th century world of whose 'conversation' we have no record (such as the Roman world of her novel *The Memoirs of Hadrian*) writers risk 'fall[ing] into error, into melodrama, or pastiche, or both'. If geniuses such as Corneille, Racine and Shakespeare 'managed rather well' in these matters, she

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<sup>94</sup> Margaret Yourcenar, 'Tone and Language in the Historical Novel', in *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, trans. by Walter Kaiser with Margaret Yourcenar (Henley on Thames: Aidan Ellis, 1992), p.27.

observes, it is ‘because they were not concerned with *tonal authenticity*’. Popular literature, by contrast, may strive for just such tonal authenticity, but is unable to bridge the gap between past and present words, and so ‘alternates between the servile copying of a few ancient expressions known to everyone[...] and the homespun ingenuity of Technicolour scenarios’.<sup>95</sup> Neil McEwan, on the other hand, seems to take the Bakhtinian position that the difficulty lies not in bridging a gap but in finding the way to integrate words from different planes of discourse:

[p]resenting ancient Greeks in modern English narrative and dialogue can be easier than dealing with Medieval or Renaissance characters, because English is further from the language we know they would have spoken.<sup>96</sup>

A. S. Byatt takes a different position again. In *Possession* she does not try to create a tonally authentic but contemporary narrative for the Victorian story, but instead uses what she insists is not pastiche, but the ‘ventriloquism’ of letters and diaries:

writing Victorian words in Victorian contexts, in a Victorian order, and in Victorian relations of one word to the next was the only way I could think of to show one could hear the Victorian dead.<sup>97</sup>

Melodrama, parody and pastiche are highly self-conscious forms and perhaps Byatt’s insistence that she is, rather, ventriloquising her Victorian characters, is an attempt to regain the innocence (or even honesty) of the original readers of Victorian words, by escaping from the plane of modern fictional discourse altogether. Certainly readers’ engagement with the self-conscious artifice of pastiche may enjoyably counterpoint their engagement with the narrative and characters, but it may, instead, prevent it. Some writers exploit just this consciousness of artifice, either for the fun of it (as Byatt relishes her parodies of modern literary criticism in *Possession*) or with a deeper purpose. Analysing Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, Maria Margaronis describes how the first section of the story embodies the development of the novel’s main focalisor, Briony, as a writer, although we only discover that the whole novel is her work at the end. McEwan is not only engaged in an ‘exploration of what novels do’,

but also draws attention to the fictiveness of Briony’s description of her childhood (and of his version of it) by making visible the historically appropriate styles he makes her borrow to express it.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Yourcenar, p.32.

<sup>96</sup> Neil McEwan, p.41.

<sup>97</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p.46.

<sup>98</sup> Maria Margaronis, ‘The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century’, *History Workshop Journal*, 65 (2008), 138-160 (p.142).

This deliberate use of self-consciousness in the writer and therefore in the reader gives way in the second section to a carefully accurate evocation of Dunkirk, against which the characters' stories are played out. Just as <sup>in *The Siege*</sup> Helen Dunmore respects the testimony of those who experienced the siege of Leningrad, McEwan (whose father fought in the Second World War) says that he feels 'a weighty obligation to strict accuracy[...] it seems like a form of respect for the suffering of a generation'.<sup>99</sup> Of this section of the novel, Margaronis observes,

it is easy to forget that we are reading fiction, let alone a fiction within a fiction: we are in the hands of a powerful writer fully absorbed in imagining something difficult, and there is no room here for narrative tricks or for ventriloquism.<sup>100</sup>

McEwan's technique in Part One of *Atonement* can work because his models are literary (the whole novel is 'literary' in its central purpose of examining the ethical situation of the fiction writer) and more or less twentieth century. Perhaps because these models are presumably also part of McEwan's own development, when narrative technique and writerly ethics demand of him a change to something plainer and more direct there is no violent stylistic change of gear for the reader; and this in a novel which is full of sophisticated devices which the inattentive or inexperienced reader might find unsatisfactory as storytelling (a point I shall expand on in the next chapter).

Other writers make different mixtures of their own and 'other people's' voices. In her version of 'Puss in Boots' Angela Carter mixes the traditional fabula with a plot, and implied period, reminiscent of *The Barber of Seville*, but her character-narrator has a voice which sets the reader, as it were, at a new angle to the familiar story, so that we see all its elements in a new light:

Figaro here; Figaro, there, I tell you! Figaro upstairs, Figaro downstairs and – oh, my goodness me, this little Figaro can slip into my lady's chamber smart as you like at any time whatsoever that he takes the fancy for, don't you know, he's a cat of the world, cosmopolitan, sophisticated; he can tell when a furry friend is the Missus' best company. For what lady in the all the world could say 'no' to the passionate yet toujours discret advances of a fine marmalade cat?<sup>101</sup>

This playfulness contrasts with the situation A. S. Byatt remembers when she began writing fiction fifteen years earlier: 'we were being lectured by C. P. Snow and Kingsley Amis about how good fiction *ought to* describe the serious social concerns of contemporary

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<sup>99</sup> Ian McEwan, 'An inspiration, yes. Did I copy from another author? No', *The Guardian*, 27th November 2006 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2006/nov/27/bookscomment.topstories3>> [accessed 23rd April 2009].

<sup>100</sup> Margaronis, p.145.

<sup>101</sup> Angela Carter, 'Puss in Boots', in *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Vintage, 2006), p.76.

society'.<sup>102</sup> For this generation, only a move away from contemporary society as a subject could liberate their language from the demand that it, too, be contemporary. As Byatt retells it,

The journalist Chris Peachment interviewed various novelists about ten years ago [i.e. about 1989] about why they were writing historical novels[...] and got the same answer from all of them. They wanted to write in a more elaborate, more complex way, in longer sentences, and with more figurative language. (I think the novelists interviewed were Golding, Ackroyd, Fowles and Swift but am not sure about this.)<sup>103</sup>

Whatever their reasons, such writers must decide what relationship their texts have to the historical record in terms of language as well as material facts. The problem is most acute in a characterised narrative, because it is the character's voice which must bridge the gap between 'now' and 'then', and the larger the gap, the more compromises must be made for the voice to be comprehensible: the message must not overwhelm the voice's function as medium of transmission. On the other hand there are enormous advantages built into a characterised narrative. If the degree and style of ventriloquism is well-judged, it can evoke the period for the experienced reader (one, perhaps, already trained by other writers' use of historical words) within the first sentence or two. By contrast, a more 'neutral' voice, for example in Barnes's *Arthur and George*, must do so with the gradual build-up of facts and settings. In a parallel narrative strongly characterised voices can also help to anchor the reader more firmly into each alternating period.

The desire of Peachment's interviewees to write in a more elaborate, complex way and in longer sentences, expresses an experience which I recognise. Byatt describes a good *modern* sentence as one which 'proceeds evenly, loosely jointed by commas and its feel is hypothetical, approximate, unstructured and always aiming at an impossible exactness which it knows it will not achieve'.<sup>104</sup> Long sentences which have sophisticated structures can set something out, develop it, and come to some kind of conclusion from which the next sentence can yet spring. By an 'old fashioned' inversion, for example, a sentence can hint at disaster without revealing it, setting up suspense as well as profluence:

Too late did we realise that where once Cock Beck had guarded our flank, now we were turned inch by inch, and pushed back to where the ground fell away, and the men with it, tumbling helplessly down to the ice-covered rocks and bloody water. It was said the waters ran red for days. (ASA p.79)

This echoes the structure of the larger elements of a novel which must provide the

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<sup>102</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p.92.

<sup>103</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p.95. I have been unable to trace the original article by Chris Peachment.

<sup>104</sup> Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, p.95.

narrative drive which Gardner calls ‘profluence’:<sup>105</sup> scene, section, chapter and part must each spring from what has come before, develop upwards and forwards, and then conclude, while including the seeds from which the next scene or chapter will spring. As well as encouraging naturally profluent individual sentences, period voices make it easy to use heightened language where it seems needed, to exploit the prosodical aspects of prose in dialogue as well as narration, without it reading as a self-conscious departure from contemporary norms. More fundamentally, since using history as setting and subject is as much about otherness as sameness, restricting the narrative voice to something modern deprives the writer of one important way of conjuring up and exploring that sense of otherness. Indeed, in a novel such as *A Secret Alchemy*, which is explicitly *about* how we can – and cannot – find ways to reach across the gap to that past, other world, it was essential that the contrast of voices embodied that gap, even within the single plain of the novel’s discourse.

‘Finding’ Una’s voice was straightforward, in the sense that although her attitudes, interests and emotions are the product of her character, as to some extent is the figurative language, I made no conscious effort, in grammar, syntax or vocabulary, to distinguish her voice from what might be called my own. Her class and education are not dissimilar to my own, we are the same gender, and if at any point the particular locution that first occurred to me seemed a little too modern (the novel is set in 1995, while she was born in 1946 and I in 1964) I simply substituted what my parents (born 1929 and 1936) would have used.

However, as I suggested earlier, the two period voices presented many more problems. My prose model for the fifteenth century voices in *A Secret Alchemy* was the Paston Letters.<sup>106</sup> They span 1425-1504, while the family rose from being tenant farmers to royal service: they are thus rooted in the same manorial society as that of the Woodvilles. The language is about half-way between Chaucer and Shakespeare, modernised spelling removing many of the difficulties for the non-specialist reader. Moreover, from Yourcenar’s perspective, although they are not ostensibly a transcript of speech, the voices of the letters are functional, either informal and intimate, or business-like, with no literary pretensions: indeed, the letters includes ‘one of the earliest reports in existence of informal spoken English’.<sup>107</sup> But a brief experiment in pastiche showed me that it would not be a sustainable voice for a whole novel. At the most basic level the syntax is too variant from our own for a faithful reproduction to be fluently read and understood by most readers, and while there is

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<sup>105</sup> Gardner, p.55: ‘to be coherent, to work as a unified experience necessarily and not merely accidentally temporal, narrative must show some profluence of development[...]. The mind casts forward to later pages, wondering what will come about’.

<sup>106</sup> *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>107</sup> *The Paston Letters*, p.xix.

vocabulary which has simply been lost to us, and could either be replaced or used in a way that made its meaning clear, more problematic are the many words whose meanings have either shifted, or actually reversed.<sup>108</sup> It became clear that in trying to stay close to such a model I would almost certainly become bogged down in a war of attrition between authenticity and readability.

Instead, I started writing Anthony. The voice which I found is immediate but contemplative, and full of questioning about the human condition in a way which I hope evokes a mindset on the cusp between the late medieval and early Renaissance. The syntax is modern but with pronounced rhythms; phrases such as ‘noise of business’, ‘God’s light and air’ and ‘I do not sleep so well’, to my ear evoke a late fifteenth-century voice without imitating it.

I do not sleep so well, these days, and wake early. This morning I stood watching the sun rise over the Fosse and Sheriff Hutton village, and listening to more noise of business from below than I have been accustomed to hear so early in these long days.

When the sun had risen in all its blind glory, I turned away.

It is said that a chamber such as this is all that the soul requires. Four paces wide, and six deep. It is the same at both sides, I know, for I have measured them. Four well-made walls of pale grey stone, a high window to admit God’s light and air, the timber under my feet and above me as straight and seasoned as the door.

My old friend Mallorie, and the Duke of Orleans: it was enough for them. They even wrote great works in their imprisonment. Is it enough for me? (ASA p.29)

By contrast, Elizabeth’s opening is the beginning of her story as well as her narrative, and her character dictates the more earthbound, practical tone, rooted in the personal and social; such words as ‘merry’ and ‘proper to their estate’ carry the period flavour, while the long second sentence fills in a good deal of general and specific historical detail, while being designed to ‘tune in’ the reader to her well-ordered thinking and style, and the different kind of reflection that she brings to her narration of her child-self.

The road home to Grafton was always a merry one. That it was the custom of families of our degree to send their children away, the better to learn the skills and lessons proper to their estate, did not make my childhood’s exile from Grafton to Groby any easier. Sir Edward Grey of Groby was kindly enough, but his wife Lady Ferrars was not. Besides, what girl of seven or eight would not miss her home and her sisters? Nor is the promise of a good marriage much comfort to such a child. (p.10)

Una’s opening establishes her modern, more colloquial voice from the first, contracted word, moving towards a slightly heightened, lyrical tone to evoke her hyper-sensitive state:

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<sup>108</sup> For example Davis glosses the Paston’s ‘shrewd’ as our ‘hurtful’ (p.272), ‘child’ as ‘servant’ (p.263) and ‘take’ as ‘give’ (p.273).

There's scarcely a house's depth between Narrow Street and the river: the back of mine hangs over the water. I let myself in and dump my bags in the hall. It all looks clean enough, though it smells of tenants: fag smoke, takeaways, and the cheap furniture that Uncle Gareth let us have from the Chantry so that we could take our own things with us to Sydney. But still, underlying it, I can smell the Thames: wet and cool and slightly rotten. It's high tide, and in the sitting room the midsummer light is liquid, with sun-struck scraps of silver dancing over the ceiling in the way that Adam loved.

Two years is not long enough to have acquired equanimity. For a while the fog closes in on me, grey and suffocating. (p.16)

There was one way in which Una posed a challenge which the others did not: her voice as a child. Although adult Una is technically the external narrator of the extended retroversions to her childhood, they are not only focalised *through* child Una, but are characterised *as* her voice. Here, seven-year-old Una meets Mark for the first time: the link between these two un-parented children, and the potential rivalry between Lionel and Mark, are established from the beginning, but so too are the problems raised by class distinctions.

I heard a scrunch on the gravel: a boy a bit bigger than Lionel was pushing his bike up the drive. It wasn't the butcher's or the baker's, and he didn't have a telegraph boy's uniform on.

Visitors came to the pilgrim's porch and jangled the big front-door bell, and tradesmen jogged down the path along the side of the house to the back door and knocked[...] I wasn't sure what to do with this boy, but I knew it would be rude to ask what he was[...]

He had a local voice, and his clothes were shabby like Lionel's but not mended, and a bit too big the way mine were because they'd been Izzy's first. (p.35)

It was typical of the fine detail that getting a voice right entails that I had some difficulty in deciding how child Una – brought up in the reluctant but acute class-consciousness of a middle-class, artistic, left-wing, mid-century family – would describe Mark's Bermondsey accent: 'local' was a locution of my grandmother's (born 1901).

Not all such retroversions are completely self-contained: adult Una may be the external narrator here, but she has a simultaneous role as internal narrator of the overall narrative, and it was this voice which I sometimes used both to pace the scene by stepping back from the intensity of the remembered moment, and to keep the reader aware of the fact that it *is* a memory: subjective and partial. Of course, with the same character as external ('adult', 'now') and embedded internal ('child', 'then') narrator of such a retroversion, the transitions between the two must be carefully handled to exploit the effect smoothly without confusing the reader. For example, in the scene where seventeen-year-old Una realises that everything about how she feels toward Mark has changed, adult-narrator Una becomes present in the pauses, but fades out again as the teenage emotional temperature rises:

Uncle Gareth took off his apron and gave it to me[...] .Then he[...] took himself off to lunch in the house.

It must have been May or June. I know it was warm and there was no breeze to swirl dust in and mar fresh ink or disturb paper. I propped open the workshop door and went back to the Arab press. If I worked it slowly enough and found the sticking point...

I was sucking a blood-blister and swearing under my breath when a shadow filled the doorway. 'You all right?' said Mark. (p.112)

He reached out and pulled me towards him as blindly as I used to reach for Smokey Bear if I half woke in the middle of a nightmare. His arm was hard, pressing me into him as if something that was inside me could help. I was so much shorter than him that his collarbone ground against my cheekbone[...] I could smell tweed and Uncle Gareth's cigarettes and his own sweat, and something that I knew even then was maleness[...]

I waited for embarrassment to grow inside me, but it didn't. I wanted to stay like that forever. (p.113)

Elizabeth's story begins with her adolescence, but I made no particular effort to distinguish her young from her old voice, although in retrospect I realise that there is a gentle evolution from her straightforward, even forthright young voice:.

'If I could sleep, I would, sister,' I said. 'And, no, I'm not sick. But it's not given to us all to snore like a pig in shit as soon as our heads hit the pillow.'(p.6)

[...] I kept my shoulders well under the covers, so that only the tip of my nose was cold, while [Mal] shuffled to and fro, kindling a taper at the fire to light the candle, then stirring up the coals and putting the poker into them. (p.10)

By the last chapter Elizabeth's voice is not unlike Anthony's, and I deliberately echoed his opening, quoted above, in her closing:.

I sleep better, these days[...] but still, as all my life, I wake early.[...] And I have realised that a chamber such as this is all that my life requires.[...] Four well-made walls of pale grey stone and a window high enough. (p.239)

The latch rises: my woman is coming to help me dress, though it is an hour or more till Prime. Even with plain old gowns and no more headdress than a widow's hood it takes time, for we are both old, and my bones ache, and there is little flesh on them. I move slowly. (p.245)

Antony has only one retroversion to his childhood: the hawking scene (p.31-3) where his presence, as a more dominant external narrator of his retroversion than Una is of hers, conditions the voice, so that although the focalisor is young Anthony, the voice is adult: 'My arm was puny against the weight and power of her surge, and my hand clenched tighter before I realised and opened it to let the jesses go'. (p.32).

Returning to the broader question of period voice, clearly ventriloquism was not feasible, but a general air of 'old-fashionedness' about the prose would not have served my purpose either: neither the solid formality of the great Victorian novels, nor the more loosely-jointed but balanced antitheses of Austen, that I had used for *The Mathematics of*

*Love*, were appropriate. I had to create an authentic-*seeming* language, in voices which would nonetheless engage the reader emotionally.

As well as specifically period language, I also eliminated in the narrative, but not always in the more informal dialogue, the common contractions such as ‘doesn’t’ (p.33), ‘shan’t’ (p.11) and ‘isn’t’ (p.47). The fact that they are not present in formal and older texts makes them seem modern to many readers, although *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the first appearance of ‘won’t’ as 1666, and ‘don’t’ as 1670<sup>109</sup>, and Fielding, for example, uses them extensively in fictional speech.<sup>110</sup> In dialogue some of the simplest contractions stayed – ‘I’m’, ‘don’t’ – where it seemed right, or where the uncontracted alternative made any particular sentence awkward. Some non-standard contractions even heightened the period effect, for example ‘I’ll not’ (ASA p.108) instead of ‘I won’t’.

I did not use vocabulary which one might call explicitly modern (though what seems modern to any given writer will always be extremely subjective), and I did not want to use words which most readers would not easily understand in their context. I found I tended to use ‘Aye’ instead of ‘Yes’ for the older or less educated characters including the aged Malory (p.77), but when I tried to standardise the rule for myself, many revisions sounded unnatural. I did use words which are now rare, or whose meanings have shifted, but which are commonplace in Shakespeare and the Pastons: ‘poppet’ for doll (p.171), ‘of worship’ to mean worthy or honourable (p.174), ‘sire’ as well as ‘sir’ (p.176), ‘froward’ to mean shrewish or forward (p.195) (despite the risk that readers would take it to be a typo), ‘fit’ as in fitting (p.154), ‘morrow’ (p.199), ‘parole’ (p.53), ‘privily’ (p.94), ‘courses’ for menstrual periods (p.105), and ‘godlily’ (p.74).<sup>111</sup> I took these small risks for two reasons. My first was akin to that of a writer who, wishing the reader to ‘hear’ a certain character’s French accent, will eschew dropped aitches and phonetic spellings, but will begin a speech with *Bonjour*, and then continue with non-standard, French-influenced syntax. Yourcenar’s scornful description of ‘servile copying of a few ancient expressions’, seems unfairly reductive: it is rather, one might say, a small exercise in creating the reader that the text requires. My second reason was that variant spellings and obsolete or shape-shifting words emphasise the ‘otherness’ of this world by subtly defamiliarising the text, without rendering it incomprehensible.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, I made a similar point at the end of the novel when, having established the two spellings of Elizabeth/Elysabeth and reinforced the difference with her

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<sup>109</sup> Found in OED under *will* and *do*, respectively.

<sup>110</sup> For example, Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, ed. by J.C. Mutter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), Bk. 1, Ch. 3, p.29.

<sup>111</sup> All these uses are found in *OED* as late medieval or 16th century.

<sup>112</sup> I had been much struck by Norman Davis’ history of Britain, *The Isles*, in which he points out that more than half the monarchs of England have not spoken English as their first language, and so throughout the book spells their names Guillaume, Edouard, Tudwr, Georg and so on.

pet name Ysa, I made Una think, ‘*Elysabeth*, she signed herself, but I must find her voice, and give it to her’ by way of establishing Una’s new-found consciousness of Elizabeth’s otherness and how it might become sameness (p.225).

In syntax, too, without consulting my models I often found myself using a slightly less familiar, less clearly contemporary, form. Some were more formal and consciously balanced – Anthony thinks ‘Better that I should fast, for by denying the body sustenance the spirit is freed and the power of prayer is the greater’ (p.122) – but others were more old-fashionedly rustic or straightforwardly Shakespearean: ‘’Tis commonly done’ (p.78), ‘I know not’ (p.97), ‘Please you’ (p.198), and ‘You must think more on it’ (p.130), instead of ‘You must think about it some more’. I also borrowed one phrase consciously from Donne’s elegy ‘To his Mistress Going to Bed’<sup>113</sup>: ‘we swam together, sliding, slipping, before, behind, between’(p.146).

Turning now to how other writers tackle characterised narrative, and concentrating on those which, like *A Secret Alchemy*, have more than one strongly characterised voice, shows how varied are the solutions writers have found.

Barry Unsworth’s *Stone Virgin* interweaves three stories: the first-person testimony of Girolamo, a sculptor in 15th century Venice, imprisoned and condemned for the murder of a prostitute whom he has been using as the model for a stone sculpture of the Madonna; a third-person narrative of Simon Raikes, an art restorer in the 1970s who is about to start work on the Madonna; and a third-person narrative describing how would-be Casanova Ziani, in 1793, is writing his memoirs, including the moment when his adulterous mistress impersonated the Madonna sculpture.

For Girolamo, Unsworth makes no attempt to ventriloquise some kind of 15th century voice. Venetian life is conveyed through precise and often sordid physical detail, and ever-present religious faith. The psychic distance of this narrative is almost nil, and the story pours forth in simple though not always standard syntax, the sentences either short and staccato or long and rambling:

My lord, they had been paid already. I would have given them something, *una bene andata*, but they were asking for a whole scudo. My eyes became confused with anger. Fortunately they were out of reach, God thereby saving me from violence, which he has done often before, otherwise they would have repented their insolence, sons of whores[...]

They were men after all, though thieves. But they departed grinning.

When they had gone I examined the stone again. There were the bruises from the quarrying but the grain was perfect and I know that I had chosen well and I gave

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<sup>113</sup> John Donne, ‘Elegy 19: To his Mistress Going to Bed’, line 125, in *Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) p.124-6.

thanks to God who had whitened this stone in the darkness for my use and His greater glory and I repented of my sin of rage and crossed myself as I do now again.<sup>114</sup>

Girolamo has no qualms about using the whore, Bianca, as model for the Virgin, but Unsworth gives him no anachronistic attitudes to women and he does not cast his narrative as a love story. And yet Girolamo's recognition of Bianca, as the incarnation of the Virgin that already exists in his mind, is retold in terms which belong to the modern discourse of romantic love. At first, he only hears a song,

the voice low in register but very sweet and the notes lingering, a haunting song[...]. This was my first sight of Bianca. (p.8)

It is difficult to explain but I wanted to keep this memory of her face separate from everything else in her whore's life. (p.10)

Bianca came almost every day. There was no need for her to come so often but she did. She would put on the *vesti di madonna*. Sometimes she brought things, Trebbiano wine, galantined meat, red musk melons from the Litto Maggior, almonds coated with sugar. Once a big basket of cherries. She would sweep up the room, bring a wet cloth for my face.[...] I would not have hurt her. (p.19)

Raikes' story has an external narrator and although it is focalised solely through him, is much less strongly characterised: 'Some feeling of superstition prevented him from looking up at the Madonna as he approached, as if it might be unlucky to have a premature view of her' (p.23). And yet, perhaps because the form and tone of the sculptor's narrative has alerted us to the possibility, the reader retains the dual awareness to which inadequate narrators give rise. We willingly enter the fictive dream, but are simultaneously aware that it might not be the whole story. Moreover, the fluidity possible with an external narrator, however narrowly focalised, means that the reader is never quite certain whose opinions are being expressed: to what extent the narrative *is* characterised. The psychic distance of the narrator (and therefore the reader) lengthens and shortens by small and unclear increments.

He took a final look at the polluted stone of the Madonna. Some of this damage of course was irreparable: corrosion as severe as this would soften the detail forever;[...] But he would restore her as well as it could be done. *I will give you back your face*, he thought, looking at her. *I will make you whole again*.

These last words, too portentous for his own habit of thought, seemed to have been uttered elsewhere and implanted by some agency in his mind. (p.25-26)

Unsworth does give Raikes a first-person narration, but in direct contrast to the highly personal pleading of Girolamo, Raikes' account in his 'stout, stiff-backed affair' of a notebook, is cool, appropriate to its purpose as the foundation of his report, his reserved temperament, and his professional confidence and ambitions.

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<sup>114</sup> Barry Unsworth, *Stone Virgin* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985), p.4-5.

*In the afternoon went as arranged to the offices of the Soprintendenza for my interview with their representative, Signor Manatti. He was affable enough but I was surprised at one point to hear him express doubts about the wisdom of restoring stonework[...]. Frammettersi was the verb he used, to tamper. Rather offensive.[...] This is an un-enlightened view but unfortunately still common – though as I say I was surprised to find it here. (p.27)*

Ziani's narrative is focalised entirely through him – 'The previous year a stroke had disabled him down one side and stretched a corner of his thin mouth. He could not walk far now, and had a permanent look of distaste' (p.81) – but is only a frame for his memoirs, which make up the bulk of his narrative and are self-consciously literary in tone:

It was in the garden that [my employer] first spoke to me about his situation, the banality of which naturally he did not see, as our misfortunes seem always to be uniquely ordained. At the moment he approached I was standing at the entrance to the arbour, looking at the statue; and it can therefore be truly said that this comedy begins and ends with her. (p.83)

The reference to comedy is part of a self-conscious stylishness: the memoirs have a different kind of public and self-serving function from Raikes' diary. The narratives themselves change as each reaches a crisis. Raikes, diagnosed with epileptic hallucinations, begins to take phenobarbitone: seeing his lover emerging from the sea he 'watched the pale gold, glistening form emerge, saw the bright swirl of water around it, the flashing ripples made by the thrust of the thighs (p.250). Dying, Ziani cannot keep control of his own thoughts, or his own vision of the past, and the psychic distance shortens, but to give us a different kind of close up, one which is as much the narrator's image as Ziani's:

That would mean she had made the first move, fired the first shot.[...] He, Ziani, master strategist, expert at plotting that route which led, deviously at first, afterwards straight and clear between the lady's legs, had been all the time her dupe, instrumental to her purposes: she had led him by the prick... It was an appalling thought, a true monster of the mind, needing to be smothered at once, before its infant lungs became too raucous. (p.94)

Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* is more baroque (in the loose sense) than *Stone Virgin*, not least because the ghost-story elements are more explicit and less easily explained away, but it has essentially a similar conception and structure. Thomas Chatterton writes his own account of how he became a plagiarist and why he took arsenic just when his hopes for his own work had become brighter again. Grammar, syntax and vocabulary are pastiche mid-18th century, and variant spellings and capitalisation are carefully used, so as to defamiliarise without threatening the reader's comprehension. For example, though Chatterton makes his invented medieval monk Rowley write '*auntient Dayes*', his own account spells it 'ancient'.

Then I introduc'd my own speculations in physic, drama and philosophy, all of them cunningly changed by the ancient Hand and Spelling I had learn'd; but conceived by me with such Intensity that they became more real than the Age in which I walked[...] so the Language of ancient Dayes awoke the Reality itself.<sup>115</sup>

The two other strands of the book concern a failing modern poet, Charles Wychwood, who acquires a bagful of papers which may or may not prove that Chatterton recreated himself and lived into old age, and the 19th century artist Willis, who used the young George Meredith as his model for his painting of *The Death of Chatterton*, and fell in love and eloped with Meredith's wife Mary. These two narratives are told in much the same voice, in the third person and past tense, by an external narrator in free indirect style:

The library was not peaceful but it was a place of somewhat precarious refuge, and by now he was accustomed to the footsteps, the coughing and the occasional muttered voices of those who came to sit here in the early afternoon. And why should he, who knew the comfort of books, deny it to others? (p.71)

As with Byatt's use of documents and narration in *Possession*, for most of the novel Ackroyd characterises his narrative strongly only when it is representing 'actual' writing of an historical period. Significantly, it is in the last part of the book, when the narrator takes up the story of Chatterton's final, unrecorded, day, that neutral and characterised narrative styles fuse. Ackroyd switches to third person and abandons Chatterton's own period spellings and capitalisation – in other words, shifts the overall style towards the other narratives – but also abandons speech marks for dialogue, which has a slightly hallucinatory effect that is reinforced by the unreflective immediacy of present tense:

Chatterton is to be relied upon in such matters and, despite his youth, certain booksellers are already prepared to pay him small sums in advance of his finished work. Lee, he says idly to himself as he stares up at the blackened ceiling, Lee, Lee, twig from the City tree, which does not grow but springs unnaturally, its roots in consanguinity, its fruit mere fantasy. (p.192)

Ackroyd's technique here suggests that, while differentiating voices is the usual game in such texts, there are also gains to be had from playing with degrees and types of similarity between them. I have already observed that in Hill's *The Love of Stones* there is a certain similarity of tone between the voices of the two strands, which is perhaps explained by the hint that it is Katharine who is the external narrator of the Levy brothers' story. *Atonement*, similarly, is not a characterised narrative, but rather makes use of different tones within the scope of the omniscient narrator to say something about the making of fiction

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton* (London: Abacus, 1988), p.85.

itself.<sup>116</sup>

Iain Pears' novel *An Instance of the Fingerpost*<sup>117</sup> is cast as four consecutive (rather than alternating), written accounts of the events surrounding the apparent murder of an Oxford don in 1663. The four narrators are of broadly similar gender and class: two are real historical figures and authors whose works are extant – the antiquarian Anthony à Wood (p.531) and the mathematician John Wallis (p.375) – and the other two an Italian lawyer (p.3) and a student (p.199). Pears makes no attempt at pastiche, although he conveys effectively a readable but evocative impression of seventeenth century prose. All four are convincing characters, and the dialogue is well characterised, but in the narrative Pears limits characterisation to their actions and opinions, and when they appear in each other's narratives, to the observations of the narrator; he does not extend it to the actual voice in which their accounts are told.

In 'Storytelling' I shall examine further the reasons for the frequent presence of ventriloquised 'historical' documents in historical fiction, but there is a point to be made here: perhaps writers find it easier to find and work with effective historical voices if the narrative is cast in the form of accounts which are rooted in actual examples of the period. For example, in *Rites of Passage*, William Golding embeds one long, narrative letter in another. Differentiating them might pose a difficulty here since even the ostensible purpose of these letters is similar – an account for a reader left at home – while here, too, similarities of gender, age and class mean that Golding has only character and action to differentiate the two voices. For his godfather and patron, young Edmund Talbot keeps a journal – somewhere between a diary and a letter in tone – of his voyage to Australia in the early 1800s. When another passenger, the newly ordained Mr Colley, dies of an unknown ailment after an unspecified experience among the crew, Talbot finds a diary-letter addressed to Colley's sister. Both accounts, though presented as physical objects within the text (Talbot describes in some detail how he will glue Colley's letter into his own journal), also make use of the convention in fiction that any inadequacy in such narrators does not extend to their reporting of dialogue and detail.

Talbot's voice is lively and self-consciously humorous, with an eye for absurd detail which recalls Dickens:

Well then, to resume, I am aboard. I climbed the bulging and tarry sides of what once, in her young days, may have been one of Britain's formidable *wooden walls*. [...] A fellow who announced himself as my servant conducted me to a kind of hutch against the vessel's side, which he assured me was my cabin. He is a limping old fellow with a sharp face and a bunch of white hair on either side of it. These bunches are

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<sup>116</sup> Maria Margaronis, p.142.

<sup>117</sup> Iain Pears, *An Instance of the Fingerpost* (London: Vintage, 1998).

connected over his pate by a shining baldness.<sup>118</sup>

By contrast, Colley's voice is that of someone equally immature but slightly hysterical, reminiscent of his near-contemporary Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, and drawing what little confidence he has from his new calling, while suppressing what is not fit for it:

Though unable to eat I have been out, and oh, my dear sister, how remiss I have been to repine at my lot! It is an earthly, nay, an oceanic paradise! The sunlight is warm and like a natural benediction. The sea is brilliant as the tails of Juno's birds (I mean the peacock) that parade the terraces of Manston Place! (Do not omit to show any little attention that may be possible in that quarter, I must remind you.) (p.187)

Talbot's self-deceptions and vanities soon become apparent to the reader, but it is only towards the end of the novel that, largely because of Colley's death and its aftermath, his egotism, while never fading, matures to the point where he realises the degree of his own complicity in the events which led up to it. The voice is at times more disjointed – 'with lack of sleep and too much understanding I grow a little crazy' (p.278), – but also more uncompromising:

Poor, poor Colley! Forced back towards his own kind, made an equatorial fool of – deserted, abandoned by me who could have saved him – overcome by kindness and gill or two of the intoxicant – . (p.277)

I shall write a letter to Miss Colley. It will be lies from beginning to end. I shall describe my growing friendship with her brother. I shall describe my admiration for him. I shall recount all the days of his *low fever* and my grief at his death.

A letter that contains everything but a shred of truth! How is that for a start to a career in the service of my King and Country? (p.272)

The other important change that the events have caused is in the purpose of Talbot's account (i.e. the novel). Having begun as a self-consciously amusing account, it has become the only record of a tragedy – perhaps a crime – which tells something like the truth, and therefore the only hope for eventual justice and (perhaps more importantly) some small degree of human self-knowledge:

What am I to do? I cannot give Colley's letter [...] to the captain, though *that*, for sure, legalistical as it might sound, is what I ought to do. But what then? It would go overboard, be suppressed, Colley would have died of a *low fever* and that would be all. My part would disappear with it and that would be all [...]. This journal has become deadly as a loaded gun. (pp.183-4)

I shall lock it, wrap it and sew it unhandily in sailcloth and thrust it away in the locked drawer. (p.278)

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<sup>118</sup> William Golding, *Rites of Passage* (London: Faber, 1982), p.4.

In this chapter I have been looking at the issues which are raised when a writer chooses not only to set a novel in the past, but to use characters in that past as narrators. The period chosen affects not only the details of vocabulary and syntax, but also the degree to which the writer may try to ventriloquise period voices, or must find an imaginative and convincing, but comprehensible, evocation of them. Since many novelists find justification for a character narrator by casting their narration as ventriloquised documents, often with a physical presence which also accounts for their survival into the present, the function and nature of these documents also affects how they are written. In doing so they exploit, even play with, the gap which exists in all fiction, though most obviously in historical novels, between the 'then' of a story set in the past, and the three slightly different presents: the writer's, the narrator's and the readers'.

The question of how a story is told leads on, or rather back, to the question of why a writer chooses to tell a story in the way that he or she does, and draws together what has been discussed so far: fact-into-fiction, narrative structure, and voice. My final chapter attempts a synthesis of these discussions into one possible, overall story of one kind of storytelling.

## Four

# STORYTELLING

A novel is an act of storytelling which uses narrative technique to weave plot, character and theme into a creative whole. When considering how this process of synthesising operates in historical fiction, Kearney's analysis of the fundamentals of the narrative event provides a good starting point. As he puts it,

In each case there is a tale, a teller, something told about and a recipient of the tale[...] narrative is a quintessentially *communicative* act.  
[...] A tale was spun from bits and pieces of experience, linking past happenings with present ones and casting both into a dream of possibilities.<sup>119</sup>

For a form such as the realistic novel, it is, as Gardner says, the 'moment by moment particularity' of the familiar bits and pieces which, 'persuade[s] us of its authenticity'<sup>120</sup> even as they are spun into the independent, unfamiliar entity which is the story. In this process the audience is as essential to the process of storytelling as is the teller. A narrative form such as the novel seems to postpone the involvement of an audience until after the teller's work is done, but in fact the writer operates as teller *and* first audience, since what has just been written down can only be judged by being read. In other words, a 'live' storytelling process does take place, and does so twice: first as the text is read by the writer as it is written and secondly as the reader reads the text and 'writes' or rewrites, the story for themselves.

Recent scandals about the 'truth' or otherwise of memoirs such as James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, which turn out to be partly fictional,<sup>121</sup> would suggest that it is the relationship of the bits and pieces of experience to their recreation in the text which readers and critics find hardest to understand, even if they have very strong, if tacit, ideas of what may be invented or changed, and what must be faithful to the facts. Here, Kearney's account of the development of storytelling from its origins in *mythos* is suggestive:

Mythic narrative mutated over time into two main branches: *historical* and *fictional*.[...] The first historians strove to provide narrative descriptions of 'real' time, place and agency, making it seem as if they were telling us the way things *actually* happened.

Fictional narratives aimed to redescribe events in terms of some ideal standard [...] in

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<sup>119</sup> Kearney, p.5.

<sup>120</sup> Gardner, p.23.

<sup>121</sup> As recounted in, for example, Laura Barton, 'The Man Who Re-wrote His Life', *The Guardian*, 15th September 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/sep/15/usa.world>> [accessed 7 July 2009].

Dante's *Commedia* [...] historical verisimilitude combined with fantasy and imagination, without losing sight of the basic human impulse to tell a story 'as if' it were happening, and 'as if' the characters described existed – or could be believed to exist.<sup>122</sup>

Despite this division the two branches have never become completely separate because they are both still storytelling processes, and if the novel first formed itself in the guise of the history of such as Tom Jones, historians have always acknowledged the necessity of forming their raw data into stories before it can be understood in any useful way. To repeat Tosh, 'only the discipline of seeking to express it in continuous prose with a beginning and an end enables the researcher to grasp the connections',<sup>123</sup> and the necessary narrative-making of the researcher is reflected in the reader's need for narrative to make those connections comprehensible.

Again, Kearney provides a basis for understanding the novel's true relationship to both form ('novel') and fact ('history'):

What differentiates the novel from preceding kinds of romance is its extraordinary 'synthetic' power: it draws liberally from such diverse conventions as *lyric* (personal voice), *drama* (presentation of action), *epic* (depiction of heroes or anti-heroes) and *chronicle* (description of empirical detail). But above all, the novel is unique in its audacity in experimenting and evolving, metamorphosing and mutating into an amazingly rich range of narrative possibilities – even entertaining the hypothesis of its own demise.<sup>124</sup>

Clearly the 'bits and pieces of experience', from which a novel is synthesised, can include other narrative forms, such as chronicle and written history, as well as our direct experience of the present and of what remains of the past. Margaret Atwood pins down the relationship of readers to the 'bits and pieces of experience' thus:

Fiction is where individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportions. The closer the fiction is to us readers, the more we recognise and claim it as individual rather than collective. [Canadian novelist] Margaret Laurence used to say that her English readers thought [her novel] *The Stone Angel* was about old age, the Americans thought it was about some old woman they knew, and the Canadians thought it was about their grandmothers.<sup>125</sup>

Despite the fact that the historic past is part of our collective memory and experience, as material for fiction it can be seen as inherently problematic. In his article 'On the Historical Novel' the critic P.N. Furbank criticises what he calls the 'modernizing type' of historical novel, typically a first-person narrative such as Graves's *I Claudius* novels (and,

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<sup>122</sup> Kearney, p.9.

<sup>123</sup> Tosh, p.140.

<sup>124</sup> Kearney, p.10.

of course, *A Secret Alchemy*). Discussing Yourcenar's *The Memoirs of Hadrian*, he takes her to task

for the pretension of a twentieth-century novelist to transport herself into the inwardness of a first-century Roman emperor, performing by 'sympathetic magic' what the poor, plodding, fact-bound historian is incapable of [...]. [T]o 'become' a person from the past, even if it could be achieved, would not be a way of understanding him or her; on the contrary, understanding would require some detachment.<sup>126</sup>

Furbank's disapproval of such lack of 'detachment' is rooted in a misunderstanding of the kind of 'understanding' which fiction offers: not the logical, historical understanding of the probable which a historian seeks, but an imaginative, affective experience of the possible, 'as if' these characters (whom the reader knows are not identical with the historical figures from whom they have been re-imagined) existed. A first-person narrative, he agrees with Yourcenar, may make the writer's job easier but is also debarred from explaining much without which the reader will not 'understand' the world depicted.<sup>127</sup> Furbank also maintains that the opposite project – finding and expressing constants in human nature and experience – is also impossible: 'insofar as a novel appeals to the "timeless" it is disqualifying itself from the description "historical," since the subject matter of a historian is *change*' (p.104). This restriction of 'historical' to the matter and province of historians seems so wilful (though it echoes Lukàcs' idea of the proper subject of historical fiction) as to be a mere debating point in his argument against Yourcenar's project. It is not simply that, as I argued in Chapter One, any attempt to tie the definition of historical fiction to the definition of history as a discipline rapidly becomes problematic. It is also that Furbank refuses to contemplate the possibility that it is the *interplay* of timelessness, and what one might call 'timefulness', which is of interest to a novelist who chooses to work with historical material. This interplay may be explicitly expressed, as in a parallel narrative, or merely implied in the fact that the writer chooses to write about 'then' for readers 'now'. Furbank then argues that the 'antiquarian' novel, such as Scott's *Waverley*, in which the narrator is indeed explicit about the project of describing the past as past, complete with disquisitions on its difference from the present,<sup>128</sup> is equally contradictory in its nature, since modern expectations of language and manners, forms an uneasy hybrid with the historical material, and results in a 'muddle at the heart of Scott's historical novel' (p.110).

Of course 'facts' – bits and pieces – do not only include the sort of material and political facts which are the obvious focus for an historical novelist's research, and which

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<sup>125</sup> Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p.1504.

<sup>126</sup> P. N. Furbank, 'On the Historical Novel' *Raritan*, 23 (2004), 94-114 (p.97).

<sup>127</sup> Furbank, p.99.

Furbank's 'antiquarian' novel makes much of.<sup>129</sup> But if the interest of the material facts for most readers is largely in their 'otherness', it is the historical facts of thought and behaviour – manners, *mores*, faith and philosophy – that spring more directly from human nature, and which are therefore more central to the writer's storytelling process. Since human behaviour is both perennial and contingent, this is where 'sameness' and 'otherness' interplay most interestingly. But unlike material facts in the novel, which the reader is likely to accept as accurate unless they have specialist knowledge to the contrary, most readers do not consider what one might call facts of affect to be as historically contingent as, for example, Lawrence Stone contends that they are in his seminal study, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. Describing the very small role that concepts of romantic sexual love played in the daily lives of 16th century people Stone observes: 'Everyone knew about it, some experienced it, but only a minority of young courtiers made it a way of life, and even they did not necessarily regard it as a suitable basis of life-long marriage'.<sup>130</sup> Although he does not discuss historical fiction, in making this point Stone illuminates the likely difficulty for the historical novelist of eliding the gap between contemporary attitudes to such romantic love, and modern assumptions about them:

To an Elizabethan audience the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet[...] lay not so much in their ill-starred romance as in the way they brought destruction upon themselves by violating the norms of the society in which they lived, which[...] meant strict filial obedience and loyalty to the traditional friendships and enemies of the lineage. (p.70)

In any historical fiction, therefore, the 'bits and pieces of experience' which the writer weaves together for the reader include not only historical experience (in as much as we can apprehend it) and contemporary experience but, as Stone's point about Romeo and Juliet suggests, also contemporary ideas of historical experience. In writing *A Secret Alchemy*, I was therefore very aware that, however many romances they read or heard sung, neither Elizabeth nor Anthony would have conceived of a real life in which the defining emotional experience was romantic love leading (in default of some impediment) to marriage. On the other hand, while I would never consider myself a romantic novelist in the narrow, genre-bound sense, it is the power and dynamics of affective relationships and intense emotions – what one might call romance in the broad sense – to which I am naturally drawn as both reader and writer. How, then, could I bridge the gap between my own and my

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<sup>128</sup> Furbank, p.105.

<sup>129</sup> When readers ask me about research they generally mean material and political facts. Some even discuss Austen or the Brontës as 'historical fiction', since their fiction is set in periods which are now history. For these readers the setting is all and the relationship of writer and reader to it unimportant: the fictional form enables them to take history in palatable form, as history 'lite'.

<sup>130</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, abridged edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p.128.

readers' expectations of such a novel's preoccupations, and some kind of fidelity to (admittedly problematic) historical facts? Knowing that my publishers wanted and expected me to deliver a love story, to follow the two which had made up *The Mathematics of Love*, was an additional complication.

In Chapter One I discussed writers' need for some principles in their use of historical facts. But it is also true that a fact which surprises the reader, provided they trust it to be true, may positively reinforce the otherness of those worlds.<sup>131</sup> A small case in point is my US editor's query about the speech I gave to Elizabeth's servant Mal: 'You'll go into the church after the wedding, not like me and my man' (ASA p.12). My editor was not familiar with the history of marriage, which at that date took place at the church door, not inside.<sup>132</sup> One reason for Mal's speech was that I hoped, by making it explicit, to encourage readers into believing this for fact – that I was dealing 'fairly and honestly' with them – when a more passing reference to the same event in the choreography of a scene might have appeared to be authorial carelessness.

As Stone's example suggests, sexual relationships are a good example of where the writer must work with both the historical record and the modern reader's assumptions, expectations and desire for a satisfying story. In Elizabeth's case, there is no evidence that she ever had a sexual relationship with anyone but her husbands: the example of other Queens Consort suggests that the least breath of scandal about her would have been recorded. It would have been false to the record, and to how I conceived her character, to shape her affective life round a fictional love affair. In any case, it was more interesting to me to explore how married couples operated, at the affective level, in a world in which marriage was a matter of family treaty and economics. I therefore concentrated Elizabeth's narrative on her role as a wife in an economic unit of the manorial system, and transposed that to her enlarged but not dissimilar experience as queen. I also made it the foundation of her practical but ultimately loving and sexually satisfying relationship with Edward: it is notable that although Edward was notoriously promiscuous as well as having series of long-term mistresses,<sup>133</sup> the birth dates of her children show that he never ceased sexual relations with her.

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<sup>131</sup> That recreating convincing historical worlds is not as simple a matter as it might at first appear was vividly illustrated for me by a conversation with the English Heritage director responsible for the restoration of Charles Darwin's home Down House. He described how Emma Darwin's diaries recorded that the drawing room was first decorated in purple picked out in gold. This undeniable historical fact so contradicts modern ideas of early Victorian taste that, he said, if English Heritage had done the same, 'No one would have believed us'. Fortunately the diaries record that the Darwins soon redecorated, in a style which modern visitors would find more convincing, and it is that colour scheme which English Heritage used.

<sup>132</sup> Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Wife* (London: Pandora Press, 2001), p.55.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Ross, *Edward IV* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), p.86.

In Anthony's case, although there are more white spaces in the record in which one might have embroidered a conventional love story, to do so still seemed anachronistic. And yet from the beginning my conception of Anthony was that, though he was twice married and fathered a daughter by another woman, the great love of his life could have been a man. There is no evidence for this – or indeed for anything about his affective life – but in research I had found a real character, Louis de Bretaylles, about whom little is known, but who was with Anthony at two important moments of his life nearly a decade apart – the joust with Burgundy,<sup>134</sup> and the pilgrimage to Compostela (p.47) – and whom Anthony credited in the preface of his *Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers* with having given him the French original (p.59). He therefore made a plausible possibility. Having been unable to find the date of the real Louis's death I was free to develop this imagined relationship into a great love, albeit one which is quite briefly recounted. I did however decide that it would not be the main focus of Anthony's narrative. This was partly because although I have always been happy to write from a male character's point-of-view, I did not feel confident about writing a male homosexual relationship with enough complexity to form the mainspring of a story. But, more importantly, it seemed to me that it would misrepresent the period and the man to give the impression – if only by omission of other events – that even the great love which I imagined between Anthony and Louis would have dominated Anthony's life and actions. I also had to deal with the fact that the Church's attitude to homosexuality was at its most intolerant in the late medieval period, and had been so for long enough that as far as we can tell it was well assimilated into the attitudes of the laity.<sup>135</sup> It did not suit my purposes – nor the history – to have Anthony consumed with the self loathing, or abstinence, that the Church preached: he had to be as he was, an active, deeply religious, scholar-soldier and diplomat. Fortunately his scholarship provided me with a way out: I could make him reflect that that as recently as the days of Henry II love between men – even those in religious houses – was considered by some theologians no worse than love between men and women (ASA p.129).

There were other advantages to my storytelling in developing Louis. I do not believe that the mystery of the Princes in the Tower will ever be solved and would not go against the historical record by presenting it as solved for or by the modern characters, but my editor insisted that readers would want it to be solved at least in the 15th century strand. As well as general references to Louis's presence in Anthony's entourage, I had found one to him as a spy working for Edward IV, so in the novel it is he who escapes Richard of Gloucester's

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<sup>134</sup> Rosemary C. E. Hayes, 'Anthony Woodville, Second Earl Rivers' (unpublished BA thesis, University of Bristol, 1978), p.23.

<sup>135</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.221-3.

couple to discover the boys' fate and eventually retell it to Elizabeth (p.243). As I mentioned earlier, my editor suggested, late in the publishing process, that although teenage Elizabeth's return to Grafton was a good place to start the novel in terms of narrative structure, such an opening – conventional in form and tone – would not create the reader the novel needs. I therefore decided that a brief prologue in Louis's voice would set forward his reasons for *not* setting down his own account. Not only did this mean that I could promise the reader that the fate of the princes would be revealed, without revealing it, but it also enable me to introduces important themes: storytelling, allegiance, life as a pilgrimage, and the reason for the 'white spaces' in which historical novelists can write their stories:

What I have known, I shall not set down. My habit is silence, and it is a habit that has served me well. Words set on paper are dangerous[...] To God alone shall my story be told. (p.8)

Pilgrimage was the idea which had grown most strongly as I worked on the novel, becoming the main way in which its ideas are embodied in its structure. This was largely because, as I wrote the characters' respective journeys, I realised that although a pilgrimage is by definition a journey to another place, at the end pilgrims find they must return home: that they are back where they started emotionally if not physically, and that everything, in that sense, has come full circle.

Since Una's story is shaped by the growth of her realisation that to write Elizabeth and Anthony's story she must do it in fiction, I had decided early on that the very last words of her narrative (p.256) would be a repeat of the very first of Elizabeth's (p.10), suggesting that she was beginning to write the novel that the reader has just read. Similarly, to start the novel with Louis saying he knows how the Princes died, and has told Elizabeth, worked well with the fact that the end of her narrative is the scene when he tells her (p.242). This idea is reflected less explicitly in Anthony's narrative: since his flashbacks are chronological, as he approaches his death his life story joins up with the story of his day so there is a sense of closure, if not explicit circularity. It occurred to me retrospectively that there is also a circularity in that his narrative begins (p.29) and ends (p.207) with dawn.

Anthony's homosexual love is the chief example of my having to find a path between the historical record and the needs of my story. But it was a different matter when it was not a question of ignoring facts, so much as circumventing them so that my novel could work as a novel. This was particularly true of the details of minor characters. The structure of the novel demanded that I deploy three separate casts of characters, many with identical names and/or titles (p.6). As well as having to keep titles and styles consistent through the story, when in fact they would have changed with time and interlocutor, I took a unilateral decision to do without as many characters as possible. For example, which of Elizabeth's

seven sisters were in fact with her during an event that I wished to narrate is no doubt discoverable from primary sources but it seemed to me that as a storyteller my priority was that each time a sister appeared the reader should already have some sense of a 'real' person and an intimate, sibling relationship with Elizabeth. I also needed a convincing foil for Elizabeth who could articulate what Elizabeth might not. Both characters and relationships take time to establish in a novel, but the story I chose to arrange from the fabula, as one might put it, did not centre on them, and did not have room for them all to breathe. So only Margaret is fully characterised, and when I needed a sister to act I used her (for example, p.104 and p.151): the others are mentioned in passing. For similar reasons I avoided scenes which brought in, or mentioned, too many of Elizabeth's children, although all are mentioned at some point.

A different problem arose with the scene when Elizabeth goes to comfort Edward after he has finally signed the death warrant of his brother George duke of Clarence (p.166-73). This draws together several of the themes which link the three strands together: sibling love and rivalries, and marriage and governing as two kinds of family business. I had not been able to discover where either Elizabeth or Edward were at that time, but the plot and the two main settings, their respective bedchambers, did not depend on specific facts. Generalisation for want of facts puts Gardner's 'rich and vivid play in the mind'<sup>136</sup> at risk, but this is an example of when the particular focalisation of a character-narrator has advantages. The reader might expect an external and omniscient narrator to 'set the scene', but narrator-Elizabeth's familiarity with her surroundings, and her practical character, means that her narration takes no notice of her surroundings. In this case the particularities of detail which bring it alive are the icy weather and then Edward's physical presence, both of which are well documented.

By contrast, I found it essential and illuminating to visit Sheriff Hutton and Pontefract castles, and explore the country between them which Anthony rides over, including the battlefield of Towton. That Anthony describes and reflects upon the landscape through which he rides fits with his military experience and with his reflective character, and also with the retroversive habit of his narrative. As he himself realises, the contrast between the two castles embodies the political as well as physical trap into which he has fallen (ASA p.30). To reinforce this, I made Una observe the same difference in their modern ruins (p.187).

I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that Kearney implicitly includes form among the experiences that writers and therefore readers spin into a novel, since it 'draws liberally from

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<sup>136</sup> Gardner, p.30.

such diverse conventions'.<sup>137</sup> Perhaps in this context there *is* no complete distinction between form and fact since, as Kearney suggests, as well as historical facts one must take account of the reader's expectation of form and genre. All three narratives in *A Secret Alchemy* have relatively conventional, but deliberately contrasted structures – the life (Elizabeth), the life-in-a-day (Anthony), and the short, all-transforming series of events (Una) – although as I discussed in the chapter on parallel narrative, Elizabeth and Anthony only narrate particular moments within an implied continuous story. The implication at the end, that Una has written the novel the reader has just read, helps to convince readers who had difficulty integrating the three narratives for themselves, and therefore wondered why these three stories were all in the same novel. To that extent the form of the novel interplays with the facts of the story. It was also useful in conveying story and theme to make Una a historian. But I do not consider it a given that readers are interested in the writer's process of creation, and for a novel to be about a novelist, to my mind, is too solipsistic. I therefore had no intention of making Una think about the world as a novelist would. In other words, *A Secret Alchemy* is, among other things, about how a historian discovers that some important truths of history can only be articulated in fiction, but it is *not* about how a novelist works.

However, it inevitably mirrors some of my own problems with and responses to the business of writing fiction about real historical figures. I had established my own ethics in writing *A Polished Lamp*; these were much like Atwood's decision, which I quoted in Chapter One, that in writing *Alias Grace* she could not alter a solid fact where one was known, but that in between she was free to invent. My answers to the problems of giving coherence to this sometimes uneasy relationship between fact and invention gave rise to the form and voices as well as to my choice of 'bits and pieces' of experience. But the ambivalence of the writer using historical facts to make fiction, which Furbank claims will 'bedevil the novelist's relationship with the reader,<sup>138</sup> is to me one of such fiction's most fascinating qualities. The thought I gave to Una at the end of the novel encapsulates this: 'Will what I write be my words or theirs? My life or theirs? It won't be history's' (ASA p.255). My novel is not history's words: by the historian's standards the proportion of 'solid fact' to invention disqualifies it as history, and its truth claims are to verisimilitude and possibility, not representation and probability. But, as I suggested in Chapter One, the statements of Tosh and Evans imply that in some ways a novel is qualitatively the same as a history, since historians, too, must make narratives in order to transmit their facts. To quote Michel Faber again, 'everything is a story. You are looking at this vast array of detail and editing it down to something we can understand'.

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<sup>137</sup> Kearney, p.10.

<sup>138</sup> Furbank, p.95.

I have quoted Heyer's reasons for using Wellington's words in *An Infamous Army*: his words, even used anachronistically, are for Heyer more authentic than her own. By contrast, Margaret Atwood problematises the relationship of her historical fiction to the historical record: even adhering to an apparent fact is not a simple matter. *Alias Grace* is explicitly based on the real-life Canadian story of Grace Marks, a servant who was convicted in 1843 of murdering her employer and his mistress. The case was widely covered in the press of the day, and there are witness statements (often contradictory) as well as an account by a writer, Susannah Moodie, who met Grace years later. 'The past is made of paper', Atwood observes in her essay, but there is 'no more reason to trust something written down on paper than there is now';<sup>139</sup> Grace's account in Atwood's novel is simply one more 'something written down'. On the other hand, she says, echoing Jill Paton Walsh's note to *Knowledge of Angels* (quoted in Chapter One), it cannot help but be of the time in which it is written,

[...] right back at the end of the twentieth century, with our own uneasiness about the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story, and the continuity of time.[...] In a Victorian novel, Grace would say, 'Now it all comes back to me'; but as *Alias Grace* is not a Victorian novel, she does not say that, and, if she did, would we – any longer – believe her?<sup>140</sup>

So readers expecting a relatively neat framing device, such as that which Emily Brontë's Nelly Dean provides in *Wuthering Heights*, are offered no such certainties in either the form, or the facts which it arranges. Nelly Dean may be an inadequate narrator but she is not unreliable in the true sense, whereas Grace

is a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold.[...] What is told by her[...] is dependent on what she remembers; or is it what she says she remembers? (p.1515)

As I discussed in 'Voice', a propos *Rites of Passage* and *Chatterton*, perhaps it is our sense that 'the past is made of paper', which makes so much modern historical fiction include paper and what is written on it, and not just to explain the transmission of the story or to enable parallels between 'then' and 'now'. William Boyd's *Restless*<sup>141</sup> is a simple example of explaining transmission: a daughter reads her mother's account of a mysterious wartime past, which shaped her own post-war childhood and has once again become urgent and threatening to both. Discussing her novel *The Eyrie*, which explores the effect of the Iraq war on three generations of militant women, Stevie Davies has described in interview how, to her, the 'deepest preoccupations' of the novel have a particular quality (my italics):

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<sup>139</sup> Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p.1513-14.

<sup>140</sup> Atwood, 'In Search of *Alias Grace*', p.1515.

[Davies:] So the novel is to do with history and memory: those are its deepest preoccupations. But rather *the past in solution with the present* than the heroic past.

[Interviewer:] The novel is packed with the memories of its central characters. Old letters, old newspapers and old photographs appear and shake up the characters. It seemed there was real power in these artefacts from the past and I found that fascinating.

[Davies:] My novel retrieves memory for its people[...]. I'm completely obsessed with history. Wherever we look, history surprises us. So I planned that in - the books on Dora's walls in which she's thrust old letters like an external memory. We keep secrets even from ourselves. The pouf Dora and Hannah tear open is full of old newspapers, which they read. Public records - censuses & certificates & reports published on the internet preserve history. The novel subverts MI5's spying on the Left in the 50s, by letting Dora find her records - a sort of diary kept for Dora by the powers that be.<sup>142</sup>

*A Secret Alchemy* does not in the main use paper as a linking device, but the past is dissolved with our present in Una's focalising of both. Anthony, too, experiences his past on his present road from Sheriff Hutton to Pontefract. And *A Secret Alchemy* does include one significant letter which bridges then and now. It is not the original but a copy made 'so that whatsoever befall the true letter at the hands of said enemies, there might be a copy extant that in better times could yet reach her' (ASA p.234). I chose not to preserve the original (entirely invented) letter into Una's time because it seemed so unlikely that it would have lain hidden and unrecorded for so long: I feared that the creaking of my plot's machinery would put at risk the fictive dream, just at the professional and personal climax of Una's journey. Even then, in a way which recalls Atwood's 'no more reason to trust something written down then', historian Una articulates the unreliability of the paper on which she and we all rely:

The letter's not even an autograph, though a contemporaneous copy's much more convincing[...]. If it *is* a copy of something that once existed. It might even turn out to be a fake – a game – a wish-fulfilment. (p.237)

Retrospectively, I realise that the copy of the letter is thus representative of all the different kinds of written account which Una studies, and which form the text and construct the story, although at this point she has not thought of fulfilling her own wish to find Elizabeth and Anthony – 'the longing of an opium addict' (p.237) – by writing a novel about them. Indeed, the question of the letter's reliability is not resolved in the novel: it might indeed be someone's wish-fulfilment, as in a sense the whole novel is Una's.

I have mentioned the need to take account of readers' experience of the historical

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<sup>141</sup> William Boyd, *Restless* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007).

<sup>142</sup> Lisa Glass, 'Chatting with Stevie Davies, author of *The Eyrie*', Vulpes Libris, <<http://vulpeslibris.wordpress.com/2007/12/02/chatting-with-stevie-davies-author-of-the-eyrie/>> [accessed 23rd April 2009].

record and literary form, even if the former is in fact not true to the facts, but it is also possible to exploit their experience of other recreations of actual places and times. For example, the three Venices of Barry Unsworth's *Stone Virgin* – highly sexualised, deeply corrupt – recall other recreations of the city, so that the reader's pre-existing 'experience' adds to the texture and atmosphere of the story. There is, in fact, little essential to the plot which demands that it be set in Venice at all. But if Unsworth is taking a risk in seeming to resort to a cliché of fiction, then he is also taking advantage of its familiarity to even those readers who have never been there: the world of *Romeo and Juliet* as influenced by Renaissance accounts such as Cellini's *Autobiography*, or for later readers Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (issued a year after *Stone Virgin* was published); not Canaletto's Venice but rather Guardi's darker and more grotesque city; modern Venice with its almost Forsterian comedy of incomers and scholars, before morbidity merges into a sense of time being decomposed in the febrile, corrupting atmosphere. The red headscarf which is worn by Chiara, Raikes's murderous lover, is noticeable in a novel otherwise full of fog and stone, and recalls both the red-headed men in Mann's *Death in Venice*, and the red-coated figure in Roeg's film of the Daphne du Maurier story *Don't Look Now*.

Ian McEwan in *Atonement* makes use of a different set of cultural-historical tropes, which one might characterise as the-last-summer-before-the-war: for example, Elizabeth Bowen's explicitly titled *The Last September* or Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, and most famously in L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*. The heat in the first section of *Atonement* is effectively evoked for both its enervating and its sexualising power, and contrasted with the 'cold and wet'<sup>143</sup> of 1999 in Part Four. But in a form such as fiction, which is held together by the tension between a 'dream of possibilities' and the 'bits and pieces' of experience, the line between a trope and a cliché is a thin one. To my mind in Part One of the novel, which is about half the whole, McEwan fails to stay on the trope side, perhaps partly because so many other elements (the country house family, the outsider who loves an insider, the workings of the class system) are also familiar tropes. The narrative form of a single day and its terrible end, though central to McEwan's conception, is perhaps also part of the problem, since we are not shown this world in less familiar, more attention-arresting forms and moods as we are, for example, the great house in the film *Gosford Park*<sup>144</sup>. At the end of the novel the reader may look back and entertain the possibility that novelist-Briony has also succumbed to the cultural-historical cliché of summers-before-the-war, but by then it is too late.

Classic tropes have become so for good reasons: they embody important human concerns and conceptions of how life happens. Indeed, what Valerie Shaw observes of how

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<sup>143</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Cape, 2001), p.353.

<sup>144</sup> *Gosford Park*, dir. by Robert Altman (USA Films, 2001).

plots recur in the short story is also more generally true of how writers work with familiar experience:

Where the originality comes over is in the skill with which a writer can simultaneously meet the demand for comforting sameness and divert it into new [...] areas.<sup>145</sup>

But tropes become clichés when the writer trades on familiarity not to establish grounds for diverting the reader towards the new, but for instant meaning or atmosphere, so that the reader nods in superficial recognition and moves on. As Gardner puts it, ‘Nothing can be made to be of interest to the reader that was not first of vital concern to the writer’.<sup>146</sup> In dealing with the familiar, the writer must re-find the vitality in it – rediscover and recreate the settings and events of the story for him or herself – so that the reader, too, will experience atmosphere and meaning as new and arresting.<sup>147</sup>

As my previous chapter on voice implied, one way of balancing the familiar and the original which historical novelists have found particularly useful for avoiding cliché is to exploit the possibilities of the characterised narrative, as McEwan chooses not to in *Atonement*. Kazuo Ishiguro also sets his novel *The Remains of the Day*<sup>148</sup> in a grand country house just before the second world war, but focalises it through the butler. The text takes the form of a diary of his post-war journey to see the woman, Miss Kenton, who was housekeeper before and during the war until she married, and who has now written to him. Ever more extended retroversions within the framing diary-narrative recall the years when she worked with him, while he loved her without understanding that he did, just as he failed to understand their employer’s involvement with Appeasement and increasingly dubious right-wing politics. As in *Gosford Park* we are shown the glamorous country house world from the underside – the world of the servants – but, having the novel’s access to human consciousness, *The Remains of the Day* can also show us the consequences for a human soul of internalising someone else’s values. Stevens is a classically inadequate narrator for the same reasons – though with different causes – as Atwood’s *Grace Marks*: the past is recounted from his memories, while he has deep psychological reasons for not having recognised the failings of his employer and of the cult of the professionally self-effacing servant, in both of which he has taken so much pride. Only slowly and partially, almost despite himself, does Stevens now recognise his complicity in the damage they did, and to the extent that the reader has also been seduced by the system’s glamour and self-

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<sup>145</sup> Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Longman, 1983), p.19. The authors she discusses include Borges, Maupassant and Maugham.

<sup>146</sup> Gardner, p.42.

<sup>147</sup> ‘Arresting’ almost in the literal sense, if one effect of a cliché is that the reader skims too quickly, unarrested, over the surface meaning and events of a story.

consistency, we come to recognise our own complicity.

If a novel, by definition, is a narrative which goes beyond actuality to possibility, then it nonetheless starts with actualities in the elements from which its act of storytelling is made: experience (the bits and pieces which are spun into a new story), structure (the shape it has in the time it takes to tell) and language (which makes the story believable). What to my mind makes historical fiction unique among fictional genres is that it has *two* kinds of experience at its disposal: contemporary experience and historical experience. Not only this: as Bakhtin, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, suggests, the writer must engage with two kinds of language, ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’, and synthesise them so that the reader can come to feel the language of the novel as ‘possible’ in the way that the events must seem possible, even though by definition it is a language that was and is never spoken in real life, just as the events never happened. Coping with the tensions which this double duality sets up – ‘now’ and ‘then’ of both experience and language – is a task particular to the historical novelist.

Of the three elements of an act of storytelling, then, only story structure – at the most basic level of beginning, middle and end – is a constant across history. It is true that a novel may engage with the reader’s experience of literary form, but those forms are subordinate to the fundamental nature of narrative. As Kearney puts it,<sup>149</sup>

Our very finitude constitutes us as beings who, to put it baldly, are born at the beginning and die at the end. And this gives a temporal structure to our lives which seek some kind of *significance* in terms of referrals back to our past (memory) and forward to our future (projection). So that we might say that our lives are constantly interpreting themselves[...] in terms of beginnings, middles and ends (though not necessarily in that order).

This being so, it is hardly surprising that it is frequently structure to which historical novelists turn in order to cope with the dualities unique to their genre, so that these tensions hold the story together rather than pulling it apart. The subset of historical novels which are structured by parallel narratives separated in time are exploiting rather than eliding the gap between voices and experiences ‘then’ and ‘now’. If fiction is where individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together (and Atwood’s assertion is supported by Kearney’s conception of human existence itself as ‘inherently storied’<sup>150</sup>), then historical fiction takes the readers straight down to those depths of our own *and others’* memory.

It is not, of course, a sine qua non of historical fiction, as I define it, that it should

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<sup>148</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber, 1989).

<sup>149</sup> Kearney, p.129.

<sup>150</sup> Kearney, p.130.

say anything about history beyond the 'storied' nature of, at most, the human lifespan of the characters, any more than it is a sine qua non of novels with contemporary settings that they explore the contemporary equivalent. But it is hardly surprising if many historical novelists do choose to go a stage further, and explore the nature of history itself, and our consciousness of being subject to its processes, or even active in them, as Mantel's revolutionaries are in *A Place of Greater Safety*.

At the end of his taxonomy of historical fiction which distinguishes invented, disguised and documented novels, Turner changes tack to draw on Hegel's three classes of historical consciousness, Original, Reflective, and Philosophical,<sup>151</sup> to 'draw similar divisions among historical novelists':<sup>152</sup>

those who write in the Original mode, where the principle concern is to create a compelling picture of the past – history primarily *in itself*; those who write in the Reflective mode, where the chasm between past and present is recognised only to be bridged – history *in and for itself*; and those who write in the Philosophical mode, where the primary concern becomes how, or if, history itself is possible – history *in and for*, but primarily *about itself*.

This new set of categories attributes value, to be sure; there is no avoiding it, nor would we want to. The best historical fiction, in my view, is ultimately about itself, about the meaning and making of history, about man's [*sic*] fate to live in history and his attempt to live in awareness of it.

... while metahistory is by no means all there is to history, nor all that there is to historical fiction, it remains the subject that has engaged all the great historians.

It is undeniably the fate of humans to 'live in history' but I would question if 'their attempt to live in awareness of it', is a necessary condition for an historical novel to be considered among 'the best'. While this is a less absurd criterion than Fleishman's that historical fiction must contain at least one real historical figure, it suggests that Turner privileges characters who are instrumental in historical processes or have a philosophical consciousness of it, rather than those whose experience is no less valid, and therefore no less valuable to the novelist, but whose class, gender or ethnicity, if the novel is historically accurate, mean that they are only able to operate within those historical processes. On the other hand, Turner's 'in my view' reminds us that the scholarly analysis of art will always tend to privilege its own interest in and value for art which provides rich food for its own critical and theoretical concerns. As Turner himself says, 'We should be wary (as much as it is possible), moreover, about confusing the value of a novel with the amount of analytical criticism that it requires or the specifically theoretical issues that it raises' (p.354).

Of course value judgements have their place in discussing any art, even if the

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<sup>151</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. from the 3rd edn by J. Sibree (London: Bohm, 1857), p.1.

<sup>152</sup> Turner, p.353-4.

subjective element in all such discussions means that such judgements can be neither final nor absolute. Moving from critical to creative terms, it is important to develop ways of talking about what works and what does not in writing, if only to refine and develop our own practice as creative artists. But as E. M. Forster points out in his essay 'The Art of Fiction', in trying to test, say, six good novels<sup>153</sup> against any general criterion of what a 'good' novel ought to be, it becomes clear that

[t]he novel is a literary form so wide in its range that generalizations about it are almost impossible.[...] The novel, in my view, has not any rules, and so there is no such thing as the art of fiction. There's only the particular art that each novelist employs in the execution of his [sic] particular book. <sup>154</sup>

From the novels I have discussed, I would cite Golding's *Rites of Passage* as an example of a great novel which is *not* about man's 'attempt to live in awareness' of history, even though it makes the reader acutely aware of history, and human nature which may or may not transcend it. Forster's refusal of 'rules' of fiction echoes Kearney's admiration for the synthesising power of the novel as a form, which draws on many separate forms to encompass such an 'amazingly rich range of narrative possibilities'. A working novelist such as Forster recognises that the reader's primary (in the sense of 'principal' as well as 'first') experience of a novel is of a synthesised whole, and that while *the experience* may be all kinds of 'good' or 'bad', how the text brings that experience about may be of interest, but is not the criterion by which the novel should be ranked. The writer's principal concern must therefore be to make sure that the novel is whole, that it does stand up, or if it turns out that the story looks better lying down, to make it seem no less whole in that orientation.

Having said that, my own fiction cannot but be the product of my own sense of history, which is chiefly of the presence of the past in my present. This – Turner's Reflective mode – would seem to be the mainspring of most of the novels which I have been discussing. But in the event, these novels – including my own – turn out to operate in all three modes at one stage or another, or even simultaneously. Part of the pleasure of reading and writing historical fiction is always Original, when experiences and perhaps voices of the past are appreciated in themselves, for their otherness; one might say that Original is the basic mode of historical fiction, using 'basic' in the sense of 'fundamental' as well as 'simple'. The Reflective pleasures of fiction which presents not just the past but history for itself, are an important shaping force in such parallel-narrative novels as my own, Ackroyd's *Chatterton* or Byatt's *Possession*, which make thematic links and oppositions between different times. If many novelists hesitate to make their work as explicitly Philosophical as

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<sup>153</sup> Forster's examples are Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Austen's *Emma*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Dickens' *Bleak House*, James's *The Ambassadors*, Lawrence's *The White Peacock*.

Eliot makes *Middlemarch*, for example, or to engage as directly in the history of great men and events as *A Place of Greater Safety* does, it does not mean that as readers we are not conscious of the Philosophical aspects of what they do. The historical novelist cannot help but develop consciousness not just of similarities to and differences from the past, and of the ways that people act in history and are acted upon by historical forces, but also of the ‘meaning and making of history’: the human desire to find and express the broader significance of those actions. The ethical principles such novelists must establish, in order to work with their historical material, are based on their sense of what material and affective facts constitute important matter and must be adhered to, what they may imagine, and what they may invent. In other words they are least implicitly Philosophical, in thus declaring where, for them, the most serious and important (and therefore un-ignorable) truths of history and humans lie. As I have discussed in more detail in Chapter One, this ethical system is the underpinning of Gardner’s fundamental contract between writer and reader, under which readers agree to forget to disbelieve the fictional truths they are offered, on condition that the writer deals fairly and honestly with them. Many writers also feel that they owe a similar duty to the historical characters whose stories and voices they borrow, most obviously with events which are within living memory, but also as a development of the original impulse of much modern historical fiction, which is to recreate the voices of such as the real Grace Marks, who were wholly or largely voiceless in their own time. When Morrison writes of her ‘disguised’ fiction in *Beloved*, her statement that, ‘my characters are fully invented people’ is simply another facet of the same ethical decision. As Neil McEwan argues, when discussing Burgess’s novel *Falstaff* and Renault’s *Fire From Heaven*,

the freedom the novelist brings to creating the past is subject to the authority of history to preserve [the past]. They also believe that fiction defers to the truth about human life which we share with Shakespeare – or with Arrian.[...] It is therefore possible for them to achieve an accommodation of past to present, to create an Alexander or a Shakespeare to interest us without allowing our interest to ‘revoke’ the meanings they gave to their lives.<sup>155</sup>

Neither ‘fully invented’, nor ‘an accommodation’, need mean inauthentic or untruthful. Discussing this, Kearney returns to Aristotle, as developed by Ricoeur<sup>156</sup>:

*Mimesis* is ‘invention’ in the original sense of that term: *invenire* means both to discover *and* to create, that is, to disclose what is already there in the light of what is not yet (but is potentially). It is the power, in short, to re-create actual worlds as

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<sup>154</sup> E. M. Forster, ‘The Art of Fiction’, in *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 1990) p.183.

<sup>155</sup> Neil McEwan, p.184.

<sup>156</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.71.

possible worlds.<sup>157</sup>

[...] mimesis involves both a free-play of fiction and a responsibility to real life[...] this brings me, ultimately, to what Ricoeur calls the circle of triple mimesis: (1) the prefiguring of our life-word as it seeks to be told; (2) the configuring of the text in the act of telling; (3) the refiguring of our existence as we return from narrative text to action. (p.133)

It is no coincidence that Atwood's definition of fiction, as the place 'where individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together, in greater or lesser proportions', might also be a definition of humanity's experience of its own history. From the first utterance of 'once upon a time' individual humans have been mapping other individual and collective experiences onto their own, and by that means refiguring their own consciousness of existence. That refigured consciousness, of course, includes a refigured collective memory from which we form part of our sense of self. If human existence is inherently storied, as Kearney suggests, then some of those stories reach back beyond our individual lives by means of the chain of collective memory and history-telling. However unstable the definitions, historical fiction inhabits the intersection of history ('what is already there' in the world) and fiction ('what is not yet (but is potentially)'). Perhaps uniquely among genres, it operates under tensions exerted by these two different narrative traditions and principles, which present formidable challenges to the writer. But I would argue that it is precisely because of its position on what some historians and critics would regard as disputed territory, its double-duality of 'not only then but also now' *and* 'not only veracity but also possibility', that historical fiction is uniquely constituted to recreate the coming-together of individual and collective experience.

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<sup>157</sup> Kearney, p.132.

## CONCLUSION

As I suggested in the Introduction, in writing this commentary I have been telling a story about a process which may be linear in time but is by no means linear in thought, and frequently evades being shaped into beginning-middle-and-end, or being tracked as a series of causes and effects. The intuitive nature of much of creative writing makes it hard to pin down what happened as the piece was written, not least because, at the first draft stage at least, I actively resist analytical (as opposed to synthesising) thinking about what I am doing. Even much later in the process the synthetic nature of a creative piece is reflected in the difficulty of separating out the different elements which make up a novel so that they may be analysed: if the experience of the whole piece is not greater than the sum of its parts then it is an artistic failure, however intellectually interesting. In this commentary I have attempted to separate out and then draw together the ways in which my approach to writing *A Secret Alchemy* gave rise to general questions as well as practical difficulties, and how the novel came to embody some answers, while other writers have tackled the same questions in other ways. These concerns included using real historical characters in fiction; finding voices which were both believably historical and compelling for a modern reader; creating parallel narratives to explore not merely historical settings but history and historical consciousness itself; and then synthesising all these elements into a convincing act of storytelling.

Using real historical characters in fiction raises practical questions of what must be researched and what may be invented. Most obviously, if the reader is to be satisfied, Gardner's contract of honest and responsible dealing must not be broken, in order that the fictional dream of possibility is sustained. Doing this successfully entails not only factual research but also a recognition of readers' likely prefiguring of their own world and of the historical world they are reading about. But the writer must also decide his or her position in a wider ethical and philosophical debate. To what extent may the novelist appropriate other lives, living or dead, and configure them to his or her own aesthetic purpose? Running counter to this respect for the actual boundaries of a real person's experience, and the readers' preconceptions of the historical world, is the need for a novel to be a novel: to be about the possibilities not merely the record, to be verisimilar not simply documentary, to use the storied nature of human consciousness and memory to refigure experience not merely reproduce it.

Parallel narrative, with narratives set in different periods, is one way of dealing with these issues, since it embodies the difference between the prefigured experiences of different periods, and by implication therefore the reader's own, and then configures these experiences by making links between them as well as spinning separate stories out of them.

In doing so, such narratives not only refigure the reader's world, but possibly also that of the characters in the narratives set in later periods: in *A Secret Alchemy* it is Una's gradual apprehension of Elizabeth and Anthony's story which not only changes the nature of her work on them, but makes her see her own history and future in a new way.

Compared to the handling of material facts or even facts of affect, the creation of an effective narrative voice or voices is problematic in a different way, since it is both medium and message. This is not a problem unique to historical fiction, since in any characterised narrative the voice not only conveys the story but also has the limitations and biases of a single individual. But with historical voices, the writer must take account not only of readers' prefigured experience (they expect historical voices to be convincingly other and may be reading, as the writer may be writing, partly for that pleasure) but of the necessity to communicate the story as powerfully as possible. The more distant the period, and most particularly for those periods before the development of the conversations to be found in verisimilar fiction, the more difficult it will be to find effective voices. From the models, the characters and modern literary norms, the writer must synthesise a voice which is other enough to be convincing, and same enough to work as powerfully as possible on the reader, rather than being alienating or simply difficult to understand.

When all three elements – character, structure and voice – are synthesised in the separate but paired acts of narration which make a novel, they create a whole which resists analytical dissection. It is the reader's experience of the whole which, ultimately, is the goal of storytelling and the measure by which a story is best judged. The three elements each have a prefigured, configured and refigured aspect, and one of the reasons why, in narrative terms, neither history nor fiction are stable concepts, is that the circle of triple mimesis operates, fundamentally, in the same way for both narrative forms. The greater freedom which the reader and writer of a novel assume, in choosing and combining the bits and pieces of past *and present* experience, and in narrative technique, can, arguably, result in a more powerful refiguring of readers' experience not only of the past and but also of the present. If fiction uses our own storied nature to give us an entry into collective and individual memories which we cannot possess directly, then historical fiction which enters the consciousness of real historical figures gives us those characters' memories too: an experience of history where the restrictions of probability loosen to become a fuller dream of possibility. At the end of *A Secret Alchemy* I gave my awareness of this fuller dream, which may only be written on the white space between 'now' and 'then', to Una:

bridging gaps isn't what I want to do, not any more. 'You have to make it whole,' said Mark.[...] But there's only one way to reach them, I've been thinking, slowly and uncertainly since yesterday: only one way. I must dare to do it this way, because

otherwise I'll never reach them[...] Will what I write be my words or theirs? My life or theirs. It won't be history's. (ASA p.255)

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

A novelist's task is to synthesise not only 'bits and pieces of experience' but also the contributions of many people into a single whole which may not betray its multifarious origins. In working on *A Secret Alchemy* and then on this commentary, I benefitted not only from the contributions of my PhD supervisor, Maura Dooley, my second supervisor Professor Alcuin Blamires, and colleagues and visiting speakers at Goldsmith's College, but also from contributions by my editor at Headline Review, Charlotte Mendelson, my editor at Harper Perennial, Jennifer Brehl, and my literary agent Clare Alexander, of Aitken Alexander Associates.

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