THE COLLISION OF POSTMODERNISM, HISTORY AND POST-1980 BRITISH FICTION:
A THESIS/LOVE STORY

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A THESIS/LOVE STORY

A Thesis

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Abstract

THE COLLISION OF POSTMODERNISM, HISTORY AND POST-1980 BRITISH FICTION:
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In 2031, a woman inherits a box full of books and notes for a thesis on postmodernism, history and post-1980 British fiction, but the thesis itself is missing. Thus begins an exploration of how postmodern concepts of historical knowledge, marginalization, time and metafiction influence five literary works: Flaubert's Parrot, by Julian Barnes; Moon Tiger, by Penelope Lively; Chatterton, by Peter Ackroyd; The Passion, by Jeanette Winterson; and Arcadia, by Tom Stoppard.

The literary analyses of Brian McHale, Patricia Waugh, Linda Hutcheon, and Amy Elias are covered, in addition to the critical discussion affecting the History profession as espoused by Hayden White, Keith Jenkins, Perez Zagorin and Arthur Marwick.

In the late twentieth century, postmodern thought complicated, and in many ways constrained, the ways we view history. Yet, as these five works show, postmodernism has also expanded those vistas. The little we do know about the past, despite its tentative claim to truth -- and, perhaps most importantly, the limitless possibilities afforded by those discrepancies -- is more than enough to keep writers like Barnes, Lively, Ackroyd, Winterson and Stoppard writing -- and their readers reading.

Stephanie Tucker, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Date
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter
1. MY AUNT'S BOX ......................................................................................................................... 1
2. TIMELINE ................................................................................................................................. 8
3. LOSERS BUT NOT WEEPERS ................................................................................................. 14
4. POSTMODERN PERSONAGES ............................................................................................. 24
5. TICK TOCK! ............................................................................................................................ 34
6. PROBLEMATIZING THE SUBLIME ....................................................................................... 42
7. CROSSTALK .......................................................................................................................... 60
8. HISTORICAL FACT V. FICTIONAL FANCY ......................................................................... 70
9. THE HISTORIAN'S VERSION ............................................................................................... 73
10. THE POSTMODERN DICTIONARY ...................................................................................... 83
11. PERSONAL STORY ................................................................................................................. 86
12. BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE .................................................................................... 89
13. AND THE BOX ..................................................................................................................... 91

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 93
Chapter 1

MY AUNT’S BOX

I sat in front of the computer, staring at the screen. The box sat beside the door and stared at me. It's a cliché, I know. Please don't pick up whatever serves as your preferred substitute for the long-banned as hegemonic red pen to make that incisive circle and scratch over it "CL." A cliché: that which is trite, overused. In other words, something we're sick of seeing. The real sin of the cliché is, though, that it signals laziness on the part of the author who repeats, parrot-like, what's already been said, instead of waiting for the illumination of some fresh way to convey an idea. I wonder who first wrote, "[Insert object] stared at me." Did he, or she, look down at the paper and think, "Wow, that's good"? Obviously it was good, or no one would have bothered to borrow it into its clichéd status today.

It's not just clichés I worry about; it's the whole idea of originality. Is originality possible anymore? Do I have anything new to add to the library? My fingers perch over the keys, waiting, but I hesitate. Harold Bloom calls this the "anxiety of influence," which writers struggle against in their attempts to produce something truly new -- in other words, not something that sounds like everything else they've previously read. (Since I haven't actually read Bloom I suppose I don't have to be anxious about sounding like him at any rate.) Even if we can possibly forget everything we've read or heard, I still wonder if there is anything original left to think or say anyway. After all these millennia of human cognition, can there be anything still unthought? Any sequence of words that haven't been uttered? How often do we see plot devices copied and styles imitated even by the best of writers? How many times have we heard that so-and-so is reminiscent of Dickens or that this author was influenced by Flaubert?

In 1967 John Barth wrote an essay called "The Literature of Exhaustion" in which he referred to the "used-upness" of language. Surprisingly, given that he followed this reference -- in the same sentence even -- with the statement that this was "by no means necessarily a cause of despair" (64), many people -- like me -- do despair over it. If the margins of my compositions are destined to be filled with "CLs," why bother to write them?

Barth didn't agree. For him, imitation was not necessarily a sin. He quoted an editor of Jorge Luis Borges, admittedly an "original" author for his time, who said, "For [Borges] no one has a claim to
originality in literature, all writers are more or less faithful amanuenses of the spirit, translators and annotators of pre-existing archetypes” (73). The true artist understands this limitation but is able to overcome it by molding, with his (or her) own unique fingers, something new from something old. Acknowledgment, yes. Despair, no. For Barthes, as long as authors "… manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our human hearts and conditions” (67), literature will always survive.

This might console me, I suppose, but does it excuse my use of the clichéd staring box? I could, I guess, have tried to phrase it differently, given the box a certain attitude: It sat by the door, its brittle grey plastic somehow managing to cast upon me a tempting and reproachful stare. I don't know. To me, at the time, as I was sitting there trying unsuccessfuzzy to proofread A Great Treason, by Mary A. M. Hoppus, it just felt as if the box were staring at me.

Why was I proofing A Great Treason? Since electronic books and deforestation had made paper books obsolete, indeed banned for the most part -- all, with the exception of rare and first editions, collected and recycled -- a small group of us were employed to scan and convert the world's remaining paper-format books to digital code. Because the scanners often failed to properly read and decipher the type in older volumes, it was my job to painstakingly proof the editable text against the graphical scan of each page. I actually liked it. I got to work from home, it was quiet, and it left my mind free for more challenging chores like the book I hoped to one day write myself (if I could overcome my anxiety and think of something new to say). And it allowed me to read quite a few interesting, obscure and forgotten works (which might not be such a good thing as I suspected they were seriously adding to the amount of influential ideas and styles I would need to overcome if I ever wanted to succeed in my own creative endeavors).

But this morning, Hoppus' tale of the American Revolution couldn't compete with the box. I finally gave up, turned my chair, and stared back at it.

Until my father's call a few nights before, I hadn't even known the box existed. My aunt, his sister, had died a month ago, and he was at her house, sorting through her belongings. I hadn't expected to inherit anything, so I was listening more to the tone of his voice, wondering how he was coping with this unpleasant chore. It was therefore with some surprise that I finally realized he was saying one of the items he'd found in her closet had turned out to be a box with my name on it.
"I haven't opened it," he told me. "I'll ship it out to you."

Accordingly, it had arrived, a grey tub, the plastic yellowing and brittle-looking. On the lid, written with a black marker in slightly hesitant letters, was my name. Raindrops still sat on it in tiny puddles. I had no idea what I'd find inside.

My aunt and I were not particularly close, not because we didn't like each other, but because our families weren't that demonstrative. We tended to get together at holidays, swap the kinds of stories one reads in Christmas letters, then slip out of each other's minds until the next holiday. Once I'd moved out of my parent's house, the holiday meals had slowly evaporated. I remember that my aunt seemed to always be in school, but in the superiority of my youth, I thought my educational experience was the only kind that mattered. Now I had to acknowledge that I didn't know what she'd studied or where, or even what she did for a living, because even if I had been paying attention at the time, I'd long since forgotten.

And yet, for all my inattention, she'd thought enough of me to write my name upon a box as she was going through her belongings, knowing that one day she'd be dead.

Guilt fought with curiosity until the later won, and I snapped off the lid.


A single book had been positioned on top of the notebooks, its cover bearing an interesting red and yellow portrait of a man with a large mustache and bow tie, in negative, so that his eyes were yellow and balding forehead dark red. Beside that was a green feather. The title was Flaubert's Parrot, the author Julian Barnes. The cover also featured a squat ionic column and had a quote from The New York Times Book Review: "A high literary entertainment carried off with great brio … rich in parody and parrotry, full of insight and wit … a great success." I leaned back against the wall, opened it and -- taking a moment to feel the dry paper and inhale deeply -- started to read.
Flaubert's Parrot, which was written the year I was born, turned out to be just as eccentric as its cover promised. When I put it down, I still wasn't quite sure what to make of it. It is, by turns, a mystery, an extended essay on literary criticism, an autobiography, and a search for truth. According to my aunt's notes, it was both short-listed for the Booker Prize and won a Prix Medicis for non-fiction. Within its 190 pages are a collage of different materials: narrative, lists (both numbered and in alphabetical order), three chronologies, an exam paper, a dictionary of accepted ideas, literary criticism, a travel guide, a bestiary, philosophy, autobiography, Flaubert's lover's story in her own words, and even a personal advertisement. It is most of all a biography of Gustave Flaubert -- a most unconventional biography. It's narrated by a retired physician and amateur scholar of Flaubert who is struggling to understand the suicide of his wife by telling his readers about Flaubert. A lot about Flaubert.

I sat the curious little book aside and began flipping through the notebooks. From them, it appeared that my aunt's main interest was the intersection of postmodernism, history and post-1980 British literature. At one point, she'd crossed out "intersection" and written "collision." She was trying to work out how the three interacted and influenced each other. "Imagine," said the notebook, "a three-way intersection. Fiction always travels from west to east, and History from east to west. They stop at the intersection, nod to each other, and continue on their way. Then one day a new car arrives from the south: Postmodernism. All three stop. Fiction and History don't pay any attention and enter the intersection as they always do, knowing they'll pass each other without mishap. But Postmodernism accelerates, too, and bam! All three collide. Crumpled Fiction merges with dented History, fragments of Postmodernism are strewn everywhere."

According to her notes, it's a complicated wreckage.

It appeared that for many late twentieth century writers, postmodern belief taught that the past was gone, having left behind only its traces, most of those textual, with all the problems associated with language-based, and therefore socially constructed and ontologically doubtful, "reality." (Wasn't it Nabokov who said that "reality" was the only word that had to always be contained within quotation marks?) Reflecting this ideology, these novels from the late twentieth century show a marked change in their attitude toward history from that of their traditional historical novel predecessors, many of which I'd been proofreading lately. Put simply, they openly distrust history. Yet this doesn't stop narrators like
Barnes' Dr. Braithwaite, and many others, from making the impossible attempt to seize history. Why was there this yearning for history despite -- or maybe because of -- its inaccessibility? Or, as one A.S. Byatt quote my aunt had noted and circled asked, “Why has history become imaginable and important again?” (On Histories 9).

She had carefully noted the major critical analyses of the time: that these postmodern histories were labeled as "historiographic metafiction," by Linda Hutcheon, and as "metahistorical romance," by Amy Elias. It appeared that Hutcheon wrote most widely about the phenomenon, with numerous articles and several books, including A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. She defined historiographic metafiction as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5). As a postmodern genre, it seems that historiographic metafictions often pose problems but withhold solutions. In a contradictory and complicitous move, they use history to question how we can know history. Elias brought the notion of desire into her analysis, proposing that because of our postmodern skepticism we can never truly know history; all we have is “…'metahistory,' the ability to theorize and ironically desire history rather than access it through discovery and reconstruction” (xvii).

As is evidenced by the number of notes she made on how postmodernism affected history, my aunt thought that it was not just literature that was at issue, but the history profession as well. While most rejected its more extreme positions, some historians seemed to embrace the postmodern problematic of not being able to know, much less tell, the truth about history. Hayden White stated that traditional historiographies were really nothing more than literature because historians use the same emplotment strategies that fiction writers do. But looking back to the eighteenth century, my aunt noted similar ideas posited by historians such as Voltaire, who wrote that “history, like tragedy, requires an exposition, a central action, and a denouement. … There is room, moreover, in the vast canvas for interesting anecdotes. I hate petty facts…” (Gossman 235). If conventional histories were much closer to literature than many liked to admit, she must have wondered if it were possible for historiographic metafictions to stand as legitimate, albeit alternative, histories in a postmodern world. While openly acknowledging our inability to
"know" the truth about the past, these new histories appeared to play in the margins between imagination and historical events, offering new perspectives on both the past and the present.

I picked up *Flaubert's Parrot* again, seeing it in a new way. Had it become a valid biography of Flaubert -- and maybe much more?

On the margin of the page I opened to, next to a passage about defining a net, my aunt had written, "How can you help but fall in love with Barnes' vocabulary?" I had to agree. Words came easily to Julian Barnes, behaving for him like loyal golden retriever puppies. Mine tended to act more like Siamese cats. But it was obviously more than his vocabulary that had drawn her to Barnes' unusual little book, as I was discovering. "Could you," she had written toward the end of one of the notebooks, which weren't numbered or even dated, "Adapt this alternative format for a postmodern biography of Flaubert to write a postmodern thesis about *Flaubert's Parrot* and these sorts of books?"

Could you? I wondered. I'd never written a thesis, having only received a Bachelor's degree. She made an intriguing argument for writing about postmodernism by using a postmodern technique. It seems to me that one could adequately demonstrate an understanding of a literary style by imitating that style. Yet there was a problem inherent in that imitation -- it veered from being innovative, then, didn't it? It was the same obstacle I was facing every time I tried to start my book. Plus I'm sure that theses were probably expected to be scholarly endeavors. In other words, dry and boring, full of footnotes, carefully considered analysis and incisive conclusions -- and they were expected to offer something original to the reams of criticism already posited. Would a parody, especially a parody that applauded rather than critiqued, be acceptable? Or would it cause Bloom to have a panic attack?

I stared at the cover, Flaubert's negative yellow eyes staring back in a daring fashion. It was right there in the review quote: "rich in parody and parrotry." And on page 18, Dr. Braithwaite asks, "Is the writer much more than a sophisticated parrot?" Barnes himself had made ample use of parrotry. There is, after all, nothing original about a chronology or even a final exam paper. What was different was putting them into a novel. Was that what Barth would have recognized as making something new out of something old? It was the compilation that was unique, that made *Flaubert's Parrot* special (that and his talent as a
writer, of course!). Would a similar style, albeit a parroted one, when applied to a traditionally starched white thesis make that thesis also a unique creation?

It was an interesting question.

I took everything out of the box -- the books, photocopies, notebooks and CD -- studying it closely. Nowhere was there a printed copy of a thesis.

If it existed, it would have to be on the CD. But my computer had no way of opening that media format. CDs had been obsolete for years now. One can seize the past in one's own hand and still not be able to touch it, I realized. I wanted very badly at that point to know if the thesis was on that CD. I wanted to read it, to see how this jumble of notes and books had united into a postmodern thesis on postmodernism. I thought, then, of our computer support genius, Neo, a man who practically lives in his computer. If anyone whom I knew might be able to find out what was on the CD, it would be him. I'd send it off to him and wait and see. In the meantime, I started reading Moon Tiger.
Chapter 2

TIMELINE

1986
Julian Barnes wins a French Prix Médicis non-fiction award for *Flaubert’s Parrot*, five years after he stumbled upon the curious existence of two stuffed parrots, each claiming to be the one that sat on Flaubert’s desk.¹

1987
Jean Baudrillard proposes that we *Forget Foucault* -- and Deleuze, Guattari and Lyotard -- for not being postmodern enough. Baudrillard believes the fake is more real than the real and in fact has replaced reality, leaving only hyperreality or “the desert of the real.”²

"Chronology irritates me,” states Claudia in Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger.*³

1988
Library Journal calls *Chatterton* “the latest of [Peter] Ackroyd's fictional games with figures from Britain's literary past.”⁴

1988
Linda Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as “… those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.”⁵

1990
On the radio, Jesus Jones sings: “There is no other place I want to be / Right here, right now / Watching the world wake up from history.”⁶

1993
Of Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, a reviewer states: "The author intriguingly demonstrates the ineluctable nature of history to repeat itself while simultaneously arguing the impossibility of events in the past yielding to valid interpretation in the present.”⁷

1994
“In our view, postmodernists are deeply disillusioned intellectuals,” Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob write in *Telling the Truth about History.*⁸

1995
The *Journal of Contemporary History* publishes the famous debate between Hayden White and traditional historian Arthur Marwick.

1996
Jeanette Winterson publishes *The Passion*, of which she says, “The past is not sacred. The past is not static. There are a few facts we can rely on -- dates, places, people, but the rest is interpretation and imagination. I like that freedom. I liked the idea of setting an intensely personal story against a brutal impersonal background.”⁹
1997 The MLA Bibliography lists 412 entries published that year under the term “postmodernism.” JSTOR’s history journals index yields 117 entries.

1999 Keith Jenkins proposes the end of history as we know it in *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*.

1999-2000 The debate rages on as *History and Theory* publishes Perez Zagorin’s defense of traditional history and Keith Jenkins’ response.

2001 “Why has history become imaginable and important again?” A.S. Byatt asks.10

2006 Restaurant review: “A few doors down is Moto, where the mad scientist-chef Homaro Cantu, a Charlie Trotter protégé, creates ‘postmodern’ food using liquid nitrogen, carbon dioxide and lasers. The chili cheese nachos, for example, taste like a fruit salad, and the menu is printed on edible, Panini-flavored paper (five-course tasting menu, $70).11

2007 Blog posting on the Language Log/Postmodern Web: “The trouble is, I believe that I understand what they’re saying, but I don’t think I know what it means.”12

2031 Discovery of a box filled with books and notes for a proposed thesis entitled "The Collision of Postmodernism, History and Post-1980 British Fiction."

1725 Giambattista Vico publishes his idea of human development, that all societies progress through three stages, moving from the imaginative to the rational, then experiencing a *recurso*, and repeating the process. Of critical importance to this process is language and how words are used to create reality.13

1752 Lord Bolingbroke’s posthumous publication of *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, in which he states historical accounts are “… nothing better than a probable tale, artfully contrived, and plausibly told, wherein truth and falsehood are indistinguishably blended together.” 14

1752 Voltaire says of writing history: “My aim has been to make a great picture of events that are worthy of being painted, and to keep the reader’s eyes trained on the leading characters. History, like tragedy, requires an exposition, a central action, and a
denouement. … There is room, moreover, in the vast canvas for interesting anecdotes. I hate petty facts…”

Gibbon publishes his six-volume *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, impressing and inspiring future generations of historians with his use of documented research, though many will later disagree with his theories and even his facts.

“But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. … I read a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all -- it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention,” Catherine Morland contemplates in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.

Sir Walter Scott publishes *Waverly* (a novel about the Jacobite rebellion in Scotland in 1745) and launches the historical romance genre, following up with 26 more historical novels over the next 17 years.

Historian Thomas Carlyle says of Walter Scott: "These historical novels have taught all men this truth, which looks like a truism, and yet was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state-papers, controversies, and abstractions of men.”

Alexandre Dumas writes *The Three Musketeers* (a swashbuckling novel set during the time of Cardinal Richelieu in France that would many years later spawn at least 14 different films).

Thomas Macaulay states at the beginning of his *History of England, from the Accession of James the Second*: “Yet, unless I greatly deceive myself, the general effect of this chequered narrative will be to excite thankfulness in all religious minds, and hope in the breasts of all patriots. For the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement.”
1848 Karl Marx proclaims that “… the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”20

1862 Gustave Flaubert publishes *Salammbo* (a novel set in the third century BC).

1865-69 Leo Tolstoy writes *War and Peace* (an epic set during the time of the Napoleonic war).

1871 Leopold von Ranke, the “modern founding father of critical history and patron saint of devourers of archives” dies after writing 54 volumes of history and instilling in future generations of historians the modern style of historiography with its insistence on primary sources, the need for critical, objective analysis, the seminar approach to telling history wherein historians write for other historians, and the absence of morality lessons in history texts.21

1874 Historian F.H. Bradley believes that only reliable witnesses to historic events should be used. Unreliable witnesses for Bradley include orthodox Catholics and the uneducated.22

1874 Nietzsche notes that “… as long as the soul of history is found in the great impulse that it gives to a powerful spirit, as long as the past is principally used as a model for imitation, it is always in danger of being a little altered and touched up and brought nearer to fiction.”23

1893 Arthur Conan Doyle kills his beloved detective Sherlock Holmes so that he can concentrate on what he felt were more important works, such as *The White Company* (yet another treatment of the Napoleonic war).24

1902 Historical fiction fan Jonathan Niield writes: “Of course, I am aware that the ideal of the Historian is Truth utterly regardless of prejudice and inclination, but, as with all other human ideals, this one is never fully realised, and there is ever that discrepancy between Fact and its Narration ... This being so, I would ask -- is not the writer of Fiction justified in emphasising those elements of History which have a bearing on life and character in general?”25
1916 Ferdinand de Saussure’s students’ lecture notes are published as *Course in General Linguistics*, reminding us that language is a system of “signifieds” and “signifiers” with no “intrinsic relationship” between the two.26


1966 Michel Foucault proposes in *The Order of Things* that man is a “discursive construct” created “… within a series of unstable ‘doubtlets’: the cogito/unthought … the retreat-and-return-of-the-origin … and the transcendental /empirical doublet.”27

1966 In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Robert Venturi, one of the earliest architects to advocate for postmodern architecture, tries to reintroduce wit, humanity and history into buildings, complaining that modern structures are meaningless. 28

1967 Jacques Derrida publishes *Of Grammatology*, which lays the foundation for his theory of deconstruction.

1969 John Fowles sets a new precedent for the historical novel with *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, perhaps the first historiographic metafiction published in English.

1972 Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari join forces and bring the world their *Anti-Oedipus*.

1973 Hayden White, in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of the Eighteenth Century*, declares that history is narrative, similar to fictional writing, in that historical works “… contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic.”29

1979 Jean-Francios Lyotard publishes *The Postmodern Condition* and is credited with bringing the term “postmodern” into “general circulation.”30

1984 Patricia Waugh points out that metafiction can only imitate “… the discourses which in turn construct that world,” not the actual world itself, making us question not only the work of fiction, but also the reality of our own world. Though this practice, Waugh asserts, history can also be a fiction.31
Julian Barnes wins a French Prix Médicis non-fiction award for Flaubert’s Parrot, five years after he stumbled upon the curious existence of two stuffed parrots, each claiming to be the one that sat on Flaubert’s desk.1

5. Hutcheon, Poetics of Postmodernism. p. 5.
15. Quoted in Gossman, p. 235.
29. Quoted in Thompson, p. 59.
30. Thompson, p. 15.
31. Waugh, p. 100.
Chapter 3

LOSERS BUT NOT WEEPERS

Besides Flaubert's Parrot, I've now read Moon Tiger, a haunting look at the relativity of our perceptions by Penelope Lively, and Chatterton, an interesting inquiry into the nature of plagiarism and fraud by Peter Ackroyd. My aunt (or rather more likely her professors) had good taste; they've been enjoyable … what? I'm not quite sure what the appropriate term is for this collection of items in my aunt's box. "Books" sounds not scholarly enough. I don't know that I can use "novels," since Flaubert's Parrot doesn't qualify as a traditional "novel." Barnes himself referred to it as "an upside down, informal piece of novel -- biography" (Guignery 38). One of the items in the box is a play, so it certainly can't be classed as a "novel." "Texts" is a label that scholars apply to a whole number of things that can be analyzed for meaning, from soup cans to encyclopedias. I'm not too sure about that. Plus, "texts" sounds so clinical, so scientific.

Still, if I'm honest I have to admit that my purpose here must be to dissect: To analyze and sort into nice, neat categories. If I were a scientist, I'd be dividing by kingdom, phylum, class, order, etc. Instead, English scholars sort by "genre," a fluid classification if there ever was one. Genre always confused me. Once, in a history class, the professor asked which "genre" had become important after the Romantic era. I raised my hand. I was an English major, after all. (Didn't I mention that before? Just as an undergraduate; I never went on to pursue a Master's degree in my aunt's footsteps, as my answer that day in class is no doubt indicative of.) "Realism," I declared. No. The answer he wanted was "the novel." "Novel" is a genre. Though so are tragedy, comedy, satire and romance, and you can have a "tragic novel," "comic novel" and so on. "Realism" is what? A class? A type? Movement? Mode? The correct answer was probably "realistic novel," but then as a history professor and a distracted undergraduate, neither one of us was particularly qualified in that field.

Also, if I were a scientist, I'd be cutting into a dead body. To dissect, one must often first kill, humanely of course, then place the corpse in embalming fluid so that the victim floats meekly in a glass jar, waiting for the exacto knife. Legions of equally fascinated and horrified biology students know the drill:
the nasty smell of formaldehyde, the entrails and organs sliced out and held up to be carefully examined (and often slipped down someone's shirt).

No. I tend to prefer my books to remain alive. Literature, thankfully, isn't science.

Nonetheless, this is supposedly a work of literary criticism, so some dissection must be attempted, no matter how smelly the process might become.

Picking up the knife, I wonder where to make the first incision. What am I to make of these three books? For starters, all three were published during the last twenty years of the twentieth century by British authors, so they can be classified as late twentieth century British literature. They all deal with historical events to a large extent, and, if we apply the standards of the Historical Novel Society and Historical Novels Review, they qualify as historical fiction because they were written at least 50 years after the events they depict, by someone not alive during those events, or from research rather than memory.

Neither classification makes these books unique nor original. There's nothing new about historical fiction. The Iliad, written some 400-600 years after the Siege of Troy, is a work of historical fiction. Not being a devout believer, I would even argue that The Bible itself is an historical fiction. However, what we normally think of as the historical novel came about in 1814 when Sir Walter Scott published Waverley, Or 'Tis Sixty Years Since. His tale of young, naïve Edward Waverley's journey to the Scottish Highlands in 1745 and subsequent experience with the second Jacobite Rebellion quickly set the standard for historical romance: A fictional hero who is inserted into a real historical event in which actual figures from history often make cameo appearances.

I have to admit, I'd never read Waverley, so I downloaded it to my old Kindle. It seemed odd, after the luxury of actually holding paper and reading ink, that I should peruse, with an electronic device, a work created more than 160 years before the ones I'd been reading -- created furthermore without the aid of a computer or a typewriter, but with an ink pen on paper. Waverley is enjoyable, though I must admit that the nineteenth century hero does not exactly arouse my twenty-first century taste in men. He seems a bit of an indecisive, sappy puppy who, for some inexplicable reason, ingratiates himself wherever he goes. This is good for plot development, of course, because it allows Scott to reveal quite intimately, through their
attachments to young Waverley, some of the major historical players of the era, but it's slightly annoying nonetheless.

Scott was mostly praised for the way he captured many of the lost customs of Scotland, but others were impressed by the novel's ability to personalize history, such as Thomas Carlyle, who wrote:

These historical novels have taught all men this truth, which looks like a truism, and yet was as good as unknown to writers of history and others, till so taught: that the bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state -- papers, controversies, and abstractions of men. (Nield 1)

Almost 100 years later, Jonathan Nield used Carlyle's quote at the beginning of his A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales, which lists approximately 817 must-read historical novels.

By 1980, historical novels had yet to lose their popularity. They came in different flavors -- sweeping family sagas, costume dramas, bodice-rippers -- but for the most part they followed the tenets set forth for historical romance by Scott: Tell the story of people as they once were (or rather as we imagine them to have been), stick as close as possible to the facts and capture the feeling of a bygone age. As Scott himself put it, write so that "… to the rising generation the tale may present some idea of the manners of their forefathers" (484). It's possible that my books also do this to some degree, but they are … different. I'm sure the critical scholars have plenty of ideas about these differences, but I don't think I want to let the scholars in the door yet. Maybe to make them happy, I'll give them their own chapter later. For now, I'm on my own here. I'll direct the carve of the knife as we cut deeper.

Actually, I don't need to cut far, because it seems to me that the primary reason why Flaubert's Parrot, Moon Tiger and Chatterton diverge from Waverley -- and what allows my three to be labeled "postmodern" and Waverley not -- lies in their attitude toward history.

Scott believed, like many of his time and indeed like many still did in 1980, that we could know the truth about history. Events occurred, facts were recorded, and from these records we could understand what had happened. An author, using those written accounts, could recreate history. His fictional heroes would be representations of actual people who would experience real events. Scott writes in the "Postscript which should have been a Preface" in Waverley:
Indeed, the most romantic parts of this narrative are precisely those which have a foundation in fact. The exchange of mutual protection between a Highland gentleman and an officer of rank in the King's service, together with the spirited manner in which the latter asserted his right to return the favour he had received, is literally true. (433)

Where he didn't draw from particular personages, he generalized: "The lowland Scottish gentlemen, and the subordinate characters, are not given as individual portraits, but are drawn from the general habits of the period" (433). In his "Preface" added to a later edition, Scott explains that his sources included not only chronicles but also accounts told to him by those who were present in 1745. Footnotes abound. Scott, as he himself announces within the book, did not believe his purpose was "… to intrude upon the province of history" (335).

But my aunt's three books deliberately choose to intrude upon that very province which Scott shies away from: the making and the meaning of history itself. For these three authors, historical knowledge and accuracies are far from givens. What pervades their pages is a yearning to know what happened in the past, but that yearning is hindered by a very vocal awareness that the past is more often than not unknowable.

Flaubert's Parrot is illustrative in this regard:

How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so? When I was a medical student some pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall a piglet which had been smeared with grease. It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet. (14)

The image of the greased piglet sticks in my mind, a taunting symbol of the historical knowledge we so want but can't seem to grasp.

In Barnes' text, the narrator, Dr. Braithwaite, is a retired doctor and amateur Flaubert expert. He travels to France to visit the places where Flaubert was born and where he died. Both locations have museums dedicated to the writer's life. At the first, Dr. Braithwaite discovers a stuffed parrot that claims to have stood on Flaubert's desk while he was writing Un coeur simple. Dr. Braithwaite, in his desire to connect with Flaubert, is touched by the thought that he is able to share this relic with the famous author;
the parrot, he states, "was something which made me feel I had almost known the writer. I was moved and cheered" (16). But when he visits the second museum, much to his shock, he discovers another parrot claiming to be the parrot that sat on Flaubert's desk. Dr. Braithwaite is dismayed and chastened by this "squawking intruder": "I wondered if it mattered to anyone except me, who had rashly invested significance in the first parrot. The writer's voice -- what makes you think it can be located that easily?" (21-22). Dr. Braithwaite's subsequent loss of confidence in his ability to attain, not only a connection with the writer, but also a true picture of the past, echoes throughout the text in the refrain, "How do we seize the past?"

With assurance from the Grocers' Company after he writes to them, Dr. Braithwaite knows that he and Flaubert both saw the same color when looking at redcurrant jam (93), but this is about the only item of which he can be certain. At one point of despair, when he realizes the Flaubert whom everyone claimed was a giant was actually shorter than himself, he exclaims, "We can study files for decades, but every so often we are tempted to throw up our hands and declare that history is merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report" (90). Try as we might to reach back through time, an unspanable gap between the past and the present will always exist. Scott might have felt confident that he could capture and convey the spirit of a bygone era, but Barnes obviously does not quite share this optimism.

What's left, after all, but written accounts? And as postmodernism teaches, those accounts can't be trusted. Language becomes a problem, because as Saussure pointed out, words aren't really connected to the things they describe; they derive their meaning not from the object described but from other words. This in turn means that words have no fixed meanings, something that Dr. Braithwaite learns when he realizes that in Flaubert's time, a man who was six feet tall was considered a "giant." Barnes and Lively both allude to this phenomenon. "We no longer believe that language and reality 'match up' as congruently -- indeed, we probably think that words give birth to things as much as things give birth to words," Dr. Braithwaite declares (88). Lively shows how this gets translated in the making of history:

And when you and I talk about history, we don't mean what actually happened, do we?

The cosmic chaos of everywhere, all time? We mean the tidying up of this into books, the
concentration of the benign historical eye upon years and places and persons. History unravels; circumstances, following their natural inclination, prefer to remain raveled. (6)

Words. They are the tools of an author's trade, and who should know better than a writer how they can be manipulated? Words can tell only a partial story -- or they may tell a different story all together.

**Moon Tiger** proffers another example of why we can't seize the past: we cannot escape the prejudices of our own times to be able to perceive the world as those from other times did. We cannot even share the same perceptions of the present, Lively asserts repeatedly by using narrative shifts that show how the characters experience, interpret and remember the same event in strikingly dissimilar ways. How can we possibly hope to gain a "true" picture of what happened hundreds of years ago if we can't even be sure of what happened yesterday? Claudia, the narrator of **Moon Tiger**, is a woman who is dying, but before she does, she is planning to write her own version of the history of the world. It naturally includes a great deal of her own personal history, but Claudia is also an unconventional historian and, like Dr. Braithwaite, she frequently expresses her inability to access the past she ponders writing about, what she refers to at one point as "a mysterious impenetrable fog" (30). She believes that historians who think they can escape their own biases to accurately reveal the past are wrong:

Prescott, peering back from Boston in 1843, thought [Cortez] the mirror of his time. And wrote great history about him. History which is also, of course, a mirror of the mind of the enlightened, reflective American of 1843. Just as my view was that of a polemical opinionated independent English woman of 1954. (154)

Basically, we're stuck in our own heads; for us "truth" ("whatever that might be" [6]) will always be relative to our individual circumstances. "My Victorians," as she says, "are not your Victorians" (2).

There's the problem of evidence, as well. We know it can be biased, but what happens when it just doesn't exist anymore? Here's Dr. Braithwaite on the subject: "The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there's always far more of that" (38). Dr. Braithwaite practically salivates over the prospect of obtaining letters that may prove that Flaubert had an affair with -- or might have even been engaged to -- an English governess. In **Flaubert's Parrot**, the letters were found by Ed Winterton, a scholar who then destroys them in a rare fit of
integrity because Flaubert had requested they be burned (47-48). In real life, of course, the letters, if they even existed in the first place, have never been found. How much more is concealed or destroyed forever? There is a passage in Moon Tiger by Lisa, Claudia's daughter, that I imagine might be what history is saying to the present:

… since I was a small child I have hidden things from you: a silver button found on a path, a lipstick pilfered from your handbag, thoughts, feelings, opinions, intentions, my lover. You are not, as you think, omniscient. You do not know everything; you certainly do not know me. (56)

History keeps her secrets well hidden, and these postmodern writers never let us forget that.

That's one reason why books like A.S. Byatt's Possession and Graham Swift's Waterland, which are often classified with Flaubert's Parrot as postmodern, irritate me. They know too much. Swift's tale of the fens is a fascinating one, but where in the world did Tom Crick find such detailed accounts of his ancestors? As for Possession, forgotten letters may well be discovered within the pages of old books, but do they usually lead to the hitherto unsuspected romance -- complete with both sets of love letters -- between two fairly prominent authors? In real life, evidence is scarce. My aunt left only a box of books and notes. I called my father last night to see if I could learn anything else. He couldn't remember her ever mentioning a thesis, nor could he recall if she'd gotten a degree. It wasn't found with her papers, if she had. There were no journals, no diaries, no stash of love notes left to repose in a doll's crib, with only a cryptic poem to serve as the clue to their existence. Unlike the main characters in Possession, Maud and Roland, who do find such evidence, I didn't have much to go on -- only the CD, which was still keeping its knowledge to itself, as Neo had informed me the last time I emailed him about it. The discovery of illusive pieces of evidence, especially when they're unearthed from a grave during the middle of a rainstorm, makes for good fiction, but it reflects neither reality nor the postmodern belief that we can't know the past.

My aunt's books understand that. And they don't stop there: they also demonstrate that while evidence can deceive passively by simply getting lost, it may also intentionally mislead. Dr. Braithwaite wonders, "What chance would the craftiest biographer stand against the subject who saw him coming and decided to amuse himself?" (38). Ackroyd pursues this idea of fraudulent evidence in Chatterton when
Charles Wychwood discovers a painting that appears to portray the poet Chatterton in his middle age. According to the historical record, Chatterton died when he was 17. Charles subsequently finds a sack of papers that reveal Chatterton faked his own death and continued to write using other poets' names. Understandably, Charles is elated by his discovery. Only it's a hoax. But it's an historical one, which somewhat complicates matters. As Joynson, the owner of the papers and fabricated painting, tells Charles' friend Philip (who comes looking for the truth after Charles dies), "I said they were fakes. I didn't say they weren't real" (219). It turns out that Chatterton, who made a name for himself by selling medieval poems he'd written but claimed to have found, had angered his publisher, who, to get even by blackening Chatterton's reputation, had forged the document and the painting that Charles finds. Or at least that's one way it happens in the novel.

Chatterton turns out to be about a lot more than intentionally forged evidence; it is a complicated inquiry into multiple layers of pretense, plagiarism and imagination. What's "real"? it seems to ask repeatedly. And perhaps more to the point, as underscored by Joynson's comment, what is the difference between imagination and reality? Ackroyd explores this question in a conversion between the painter Henry Wallis and the writer George Meredith while the latter is posing as Chatterton so the Wallis can paint a portrait of him after death. Meredith says:

'I said that words were real, Henry, I did not say that what they depicted was real. Our dear dead poet created the monk Rowley out of thin air, and yet he has more life in him than any medieval priest who actually existed. The invention is always more real. … But Chatterton did not create an individual simply. He invented an entire period and made its imagination his own: no one had properly understood the medieval world until Chatterton summoned it into existence. The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it. And that is why he is feared.' Meredith came up to Wallis, and for the first time looked at the canvas. 'And that is why,' he added quietly, 'this will always be remembered as the true death of Chatterton.' (157)

This discussion makes a crucial point about the power of the imagination formulated as postmodern truth: The writer creates the world for his readers. In other words, words create our reality, and words are all that
remain of the past. The little history we actually do know is essentially, inescapably, nothing more than a human construct.

This situation could easily become a cause of despair for the researcher who longs to know the past. Like Dr. Braithwaite, we often find it frustrating not to be able to connect with historical events and figures. Even the simplest things confound him: "I just want to know if fat people were fatter then. And were mad people madder?" (91). But even in their inability to answer these questions, these books do not stoop to self-pity. Instead they somehow manage to transform our loss into a positive experience. As Charles reads the different biographies of Chatterton, he is at first frustrated because "…each biography described a quite different poet: even the simplest observation by one was contradicted by another, so that nothing seemed certain." Then he has a revelation: "At first Charles had been annoyed by these discrepancies but then he was exhilarated by them: for it meant that anything became possible. If there were no truths, everything was true" (127). Our inability to seize the past becomes a chance to let our imaginations free -- to create alternatives. In Chatterton, this realization gives Philip the confidence to write the story of the Chatterton papers and keep Charles' belief in them alive. He tells Vivien, "The important thing is what Charles imagined, and we can keep hold of that. That isn't an illusion. The imagination never dies" (232). Quite simply, if we are not tied to a single "truth" we are free to explore multiple truths. A new world opens up in which Chatterton may not have died from suicide but from an accidental overdose. The human-constructedness of history becomes a cause for opportunity rather than for despair.

This optimism spreads to other areas in our books. Far from giving up because they will never be able to know the past the way they want to, these authors switch their focus to the search itself. Dr. Braithwaite alludes to this when he discusses the ending of Flaubert's L'Education sentimentale. Two men are reminiscing about an aborted trip to a brothel they'd made as boys that was still "…the best day of their lives. Isn't the most reliable form of pleasure, Flaubert implies, the pleasure of anticipation? Who needs to burst into fulfilment's desolate attic?" (13). Not our authors, apparently. In Moon Tiger, Claudia likewise argues that a lack ultimate answers should not be seen as an impediment but as an asset: "Argument, of course, is the whole point of history. Disagreement, my word against yours; this evidence against that. If
there were such a things as absolute truth the debate would lose its luster. I, for one, would no longer be interested" (14). For Claudia, it's not about knowing but about exploring different possibilities.

It comes down to the fact that we must accept the presence of two parrots, both with valid claims, one or neither of which may be the actual parrot. Dr. Braithwaite admits to the mixed feelings he experiences upon learning this "truth," but he acquiesces with a certain grace: "Well, perhaps that's as it should be" (189). Claudia, for her part, finds that even though she "cannot shed my skin and put on yours, cannot strip my mind of its knowledge and its prejudices, cannot looking cleanly at the world with the eyes of a child" she still "get[s] a frisson from contemplating you" (31). The little we do know, despite its tentative claim to truth -- and, perhaps most importantly, the limitless possibilities afforded by those discrepancies -- is more than enough to keep writers like Barnes, Lively and Ackroyd writing -- and their readers reading.
Chapter 4

POSTMODERN PERSONAGES

I was thumbing through my aunt's notebooks last night in search of … I'm not sure what. The meaning of postmodernism? Evidence of the existence -- or nonexistence -- of the thesis? Or maybe something else entirely. I found myself wondering what she was thinking as she made these notes. Who she was? What was she searching for?

Whatever it was, I had yet to find it. Aside from her initial outline for the postmodern thesis, the notebooks contained mainly quotes from the theoretical and critical analyses -- and I was flipping through them with an increasing sense of futility when it struck me that I'd been reading a lot of words that started with the letter "P": parataxis, paradox, pluralism, problematize. I wonder if it's possible to define postmodernism solely in terms of words that start with "P"? Maybe I'll make a list one of these days.

Then, at the top of one page, a line without an attribute caught my eye: "PoMo privileges the periphery by challenging the center." (Note the use of "P" words.) I was intrigued, though I have to admit I wasn't quite sure what it meant. I pictured a circle with a dot in the middle and a black line defining the edge: center and periphery. I didn't think she had a geometric shape in mind, however. What, I wondered, within the terms of postmodernism, do "center" and "periphery" signify and why is this "center" being "challenged"? The answer had to be in the box somewhere.

Since my aunt had jotted her insight in the margins of her notes on Linda Hutcheon's A Poetics of Postmodernism, I went looking for the book in question and found some interesting ideas. According to Hutcheon, "postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchical, closed systems" (41). The origin of this stance, of course, begins with Lyotard, who stated, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarrative" (qted in Southgate 5). Metanarratives, it seems, are those "narratives that attempt to explain the nature of the human condition" (Thompson 107). They come in a number of flavors, but of particular importance to postmodernism is the "… metanarrative of progress -- scientific, social, cultural, moral and other things beside" (109). Hmmm. Could the postmodernists have been able to see into the future better than they could they past? Had they foreseen what the "progress" they questioned would lead to? I recalled Dr. Braithwaite's refutation of Flaubert's disbelief in progress: "I cite
the twentieth century in his defence," (129). As Claudia in Moon Tiger says, "Tampering with the physical world is what we do supremely well -- in the end, perhaps, we shall achieve it definitively. Finis. And history will indeed come to an end" (13). Or as Neo likes to say, the Earth is now poised like a wet dog about to shake us -- and unfortunately everything else -- off for good.

However, the postmodernists did not attack our assumptions outright; they thought that leading us to question the validity of our beliefs would be enough to make us realize our errors before it was too late. They also didn't focus solely on the issue of progress, but instead questioned "...the centralizing and totalizing impulse of humanist thought" (Hutcheon 58). This is the belief that one could view -- and judge -- the world from a central, privileged perspective -- usually one written by "history's 'winners'" (Southgate 37). Postmodernists challenge this viewpoint as being impossible in a world that is fragmented, diverse, multiple and provisional. The "center" thus becomes this fixed, ego-centric, Eurocentric position of power. Hutcheon asserts that postmodernists, in order to question the validity of this totalizing center, turn away from it to focus instead on the margins -- those players who up until then had been mostly ignored as not relevant to history, politics, or much of anything for that matter -- the periphery.

Another name for this periphery is "the Other." You could not have spent many hours strolling through the halls of academia in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries without being confronted by references to "the Other." Bluntly put, "the Other" was anyone who was not a white male in a position of power. We have the likes of Simone De Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler to thank for the term, who adapted it from Lacan, who had in turn adapted it from Hegel. For De Beauvoir and her colleagues, "the Other" was usually a representation of women, who had long been oppressed by the male sex. Edward Said expanded the definition so that it applies to people from colonized countries who had also experienced hegemonic treatment. Thus, by the late twentieth century, the term was used widely in both feminist and postcolonial studies. It was then appropriated by college composition professors, who encouraged the language of "the Other" rather than the now viewed as hegemonic standard English academic language of the center, a shift that dismayed professors in other departments and confused students who suddenly received failing grades on term papers after they'd sailed through composition courses. But what matters to us is that the idea of "the Other" had also migrated to mainstream History and English Literature.
departments. For instance, Amy Elias claims that metahistorical romance "...defers objectification of the Other and deconstructs the relation between center and margin" (201).

Hutcheon refrains from using the term and even challenges its legitimacy. She believes that postmodernism actually questions the binary opposition of self and other. "Difference," she says, "suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion" (61). Instead, she employs "ex-centric" to refer to those "on the border or margin, inside yet outside" (67) subjects who challenge the center. She writes that "if the center is seen as a construct, a fiction, not a fixed and unchangeable reality, the 'old either-or begins to break down' as Susan Griffin put it and the new and-also of multiplicity and difference opens up new possibilities" (62). Despite those grandiose terms, what this really translates into is a new focus on stories from the losers. History has always been told about the powerful few -- the kings (and sometimes queens), the generals, the notorious -- basically the ones who stand out and shout loudest. "All the voices that have managed to get themselves heard," is how Claudia puts it (5). Instead, Hutcheon cites "the freak" and the "multi-ringed circus" and "the valuing of the local and peripheral" (61) as strategies that postmodern writers use to upset -- to essentially decenter -- the center.

With this in mind, I went in search of marginalized characters. Here's one of my favorites: the woodworm in the first chapter of Barnes' *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*. I'm sure it doesn't get much more marginalized than a termite, but this is a special termite: a stowaway on Noah's ark who has a version of that story you'll never find in the Bible. His kind weren't invited for that special cruise, you see. "When I recall the Voyage," he says, "I feel no sense of obligation; gratitude puts no smear of Vaseline on the lens. My account you can trust" (4). His is a more sensible story than some I've read.

It is Jeanette Winterson who might possibly win the award for strangest main characters, though. In *The Passion*, she presents a one-sided love story between Henri, a French farm boy recruited into Napoleon's army to cook chickens for the Emperor, and Villanelle, a cross-dressing, bi-sexual Venetian with webbed toes who can walk on water. Henri's friends include Domino the midget who tends to Napoleon's horses and who "... came from a circus himself and stood as high as the horse's flank" (3) and "Patrick, the de-frocked priest with the eagle eye" (15) who can see for miles. Villanelle literally loses her
heart to a woman with whom she spends nine days, then marries a man who sells her into prostitution after she tries to run away from him. Though she has Henri's child after he recovers her heart and kills her husband, she refuses to marry him. She ends up a single mom while he chooses to remain imprisoned in a mental institution on an island. It's not your typical cast of characters for a novel set during the Napoleonic Wars -- or any other time for that matter.

But I saw a problem. Where were my marginalized characters? Admittedly, Ackroyd does present some pretty quirky ones in *Chatterton*. Among his cast of decidedly abnormal *dramatis personae*: Harriet Scrope, who sips gin with a teaspoon, wears a fur hat with a stuffed bird pinned to it, and refers to herself as "Mother," and Pat Joynson, who is a flamboyant, giggling, aging gay man who jogs around a church yard in Bristol "… wearing a leopard-skin leotard with the top of a red track-suit hanging over it" (48). Even Charles, one of the main characters, has some obvious quirks, including his habit of actually eating the pages out of books. But isn't any really good author (postmodern or not) capable of creating such unique characters? Don't we expect it of them? And these characters may well inhabit the margins, but I question if they fully succeed in challenging the center and asserting that it "… becomes a fiction -- necessary, desired, but a fiction nonetheless" (Hutcheon 58). I enjoyed their stories, but I didn't find myself challenging my assumptions about "normal" main characters as I read them. I had a feeling I was missing something.

It was while I was thumbing through *The Passion* again that I realized what the authors in my box are really doing: they are encouraging readers to question the center not by focusing on the margins but by destabilizing the center itself. It's right there in Winterson's depiction of Napoleon. In this book he is not shown as the typical military genius nor as a power-hungry tyrant. Instead her portrait is that of a man who loves chicken. It begins with the very first sentence of the novel: "It was Napoleon who had such a passion for chicken that he kept his chefs working around the clock." Then in the next paragraph: "Odd to be so governed by an appetite" (3). We learn he would only allow people who were shorter than five foot two to wait on him, that he was a Leo, that Josephine could beat him at billiards, that he used winter campaigns "like a larder" just "to keep his chickens fresh" (5), that he kept water hot at all times so he could take baths when he chose. Before his coronation, Henri says, "This holiday mood of Napoleon's was almost a
madness. He had appeared at dinner two nights ago dressed as the Pontiff and lewdly asked Josephine how intimate she would like to be with God" (34). True? I don't know. But she has turned the famous figure from history into something absurd, someone far more alien and "other" than her motley crew of characters mentioned above who, despite their oddities, are portrayed as likeable, even believable, human beings.

I also found that Hutcheon, despite her assertions about "ex-centrics," had acknowledged this tendency. "Postmodernism does not move the marginal to the center," she states and goes on to note that, "It does not invert the valuing of centers into that of peripheries and borders, as much as use that paradoxical doubled positioning to critique the inside from both the outside and the inside" (69). I think she's certainly correct about the first part, since I could find no evidence of those on the margins being elevated to an "inside" position. Yet what I did find is a blatant de-centering of the center -- a shift that moves the center to the margin without anything replacing the void left behind. The values for center and margin are not inverted, one replacing the other. The center simply becomes marginalized like everything else.

Take, for instance, Thomas Chatterton. Though he's not Shakespeare or Flaubert, Chatterton, a forger of medieval poetry, is famous enough to have a portrait depicting his death hanging in the Tate Gallery, primarily because of the romantic legend that has grown around him of "… the sad young man [who] killed himself at the age of seventeen" (Ackroyd 53). The author carefully upsets this traditional vision of Chatterton by giving the reader three competing versions of his life. The first is the one that Philip reads from the brochure on Chatterton that he has bought. This is the standard, authorized version: the young genius taken from life too soon. The second version is more colorful. It's in the papers that Charles finds that are supposedly written by Chatterton after he fakes his own death. The picture here is that of an arrogant, over-confident man who travels to London from the "shit-hole and whorehouse" of Bristol so that his "… genius might blaze and consume all those who saw it" (88). Only his work doesn't sell, and he's facing destitution when a bookseller approaches him with the idea of concocting his suicide so that he can continue to pursue his greatest talent by forging the works of other great authors, including William Blake.

After Ackroyd undermines the second version as itself a forgery penned by an angry bookseller in order to get revenge upon Chatterton, he presents his third version of Chatterton's story. This Thomas
Chatterton is an exhilarated young man who, "… the sun catching his red hair as he leaps at the centre of the turning world" (194), knows he's on the verge of fame and fortune. The only snag is that he's caught a venereal disease from his landlady, which a supposed friend advises him to treat with "our illustrious London kill-or-cure" (194), a blend of arsenic and opium. Only Chatterton takes too much arsenic and is killed rather than cured. Not the romantically tragic suicide of a depressed genius taken before his time, but an ugly accidental overdose of alcohol, opium and arsenic used in an effort to treat the clap.

Added to these conflicting accounts is the fragmented narrative that Ackroyd employs to convey them. The discounted second chronicle is presented whole, but the first and third versions are disrupted. As he's reading the Chatterton pamphlet, Phillip is distracted by his conversation with Charles and the passage of the train. The final story of Chatterton's last days is interspersed with fragments of the present, where Philip's joyful decision to write his own book is juxtaposed with Chatterton's painful death. All of it leaves the reader in confusion as to just who Chatterton really was. The second version seems plausible, then proves to be false. The third version contradicts the standard version, but seems plausible as well. But we've already fallen for the trap of believing what turns out not to be true. In the end, we learn as Charles does, "If there were no truths, everything was true" (127). Our romanticized version of the tragic poet is destabilized -- and with it our certainty about other such "centralized" historic figures.

Gustave Flaubert, another published European male and the focus of Barnes' unusual biography in Flaubert's Parrot, is also undeniably from the "center" class. Rather than decentering Flaubert by presenting competing and false versions of his life, though, Barnes employs a different strategy. He essentially trivializes Flaubert through the use of random, unconnected facts. Take, for instance, the chapter called "The Flaubert Bestiary," which discusses Flaubert in terms in of the animals he wrote and talked about or generally interacted with at some point in his life. Most often cited is the bear with whom Flaubert identified himself, but, as Dr. Braithwaite carefully catalogs, camels, sheep, monkeys, donkeys, ostriches, dogs and, of course, parrots, all played a role. But there are gaps in the evidence even here. "Not sufficient study, to my mind, has been made of the pets which were kept at Croisset" (61), Dr. Braithwaite laments.

Flaubert's Parrot contains, in addition to the Bestiary, a record of Flaubert's thoughts about and experiences with trains. It is interesting to note that Flaubert connected trains to progress, the main reason
he disliked them. At age 15, we are told, Flaubert made a list of "… the misdeeds of modern civilization: 'Railways, poisons, enema pumps, cream tarts, royalty and the guillotine'" (108). We next learn about the books Flaubert failed to write, which leads naturally to a list of ambitions he also failed to achieve, including being "… a Turk in Turkey, or a muleteer in Spain, or a cameleer in Egypt … a lazzarone in Naples … a bandit in Smyrna … a Brahmin" (122-123). And here's an interesting tidbit one rarely runs across in conventional biographies:

Flaubert and Bouilhet went to the same school; they shared the same ideas and the same whores; they had the same aesthetic principles, and similar literary ambitions; each tried the theatre as his second genre. Flaubert called Bouilhet 'my left testicle'. In 1854, Bouilhet stayed a night in the Mantes hotel that Gustave and Louise used to patronize: 'I slept in your bed,' he reported, 'and I shat in your latrines (what curious symbolism!).'

(174-175)

It's obvious that Barnes combed through most, if not all, of the correspondence surrounding Flaubert in order to produce "… an enormous dossier of oddities, idiocies and self-condemning quotations" (57). That description actually applies to what Flaubert intended the second half of Bouvard et Pecuchet to be, but it's remarkably similar to what Barnes has created here, I think. It is important to note that this decentering through trivialization doesn't belittle Flaubert, though. Barnes cannot hide his respect for the man -- but it is respect for an ordinary man with all his "… oddities, idiocies and self-condemning quotations" and not for the famous author of Madame Bovary that shines through here.

Then there's Moon Tiger. When reading this novel, one might be tempted to classify Claudia herself as the character who upsets the center. A female war correspondent during World War II, Claudia can be described as an early feminist because she isn't content to be the stereotypical nurse or a secretary. But then she blatantly bribes a man with the suggestion of sex to get access to actual battle fields in the desert. Which makes her not quite a feminist because Claudia is more than willing to use her looks to her advantage. Claudia is also a "maverick" historian who quite gleefully has "…infuriated more colleagues than you've had hot dinners" (3) because she refuses to follow traditional paths and write conventional history books. She will go on to have a successful career and a child and will live off and on with a man she
never marries -- all before such things were fashionable. Even in 1997, Fredrick Michael Holmes must
have found her situation questionable. He refers to Jasper, the father of her child but the man she clearly
never marries, as her "husband" (65). I find this slip somewhat telling, but that just might be me. I include it
in the interest of scholarship.

Despite all of this, Claudia -- and the role women have played in wars and history -- is not Lively's
target for decentering. It's actually an historical event -- World War II -- that receives her strongest critique.
She shows us a side of the war that is not what we traditionally associate with wars. History books delve
into the causes that lead up to the conflict, they analyze the battles and strategies ("Plan Barbarossa …
Operations Snowdrop, Hyacinth, Daffodil and Tulop" [67]), and they record the numbers ("… the million
dead of Leningrad, the three million labour slaves from Belorussia and the Ukraine, the two million
prisoners of Kiev, the quarter million maimed by frostbite…" [66-67]). Hollywood supplies us with the
clichéd images: the dog fights, "… the young hero, called up in 1939 … seen saying farewell to his fiancée
and his mother" (50). Lively, on the other hand, explores another dimension to the war: "This dimension
has smell and feel and touch. It smells of Moon Tiger, kerosene, dung and dust. Its feelings are so sharp
that Claudia gets up, slams the television into silence and sits staring at the blank pane of glass, where the
story rolls on" (50). This is a very personal dimension, a war shared by two people: one trying to break the
rules by being a female war reporter in Cairo and one trying to understand alternating horror and boredom
and unexpected love. It's a version that doesn't quite sum up with what we normally think of when we
picture war.

I don't know about you, but when I imagine World War II, I usually don't think of the English, in
their "… silk and cotton dresses, the uniforms, the tropical suits" (58) attending a sermon in a cathedral in
Cairo. Nor do I picture crowded bars, "… the bland Egyptian evening sounds of ice chinking in glasses, the
slap of the suffragis' slippers on the stone of the hotel terrace, the buzz of voices, laughter -- the sounds of a
hundred other evenings, at Gezira Sporting Club, the Turf Club, Shepheard's" (73). I especially don't think
of site-seeing. Yet that is exactly what Claudia and Tom do when he has leave -- they visit the pyramids
and the zoo and make love in a hotel in Luxor.
Through his diary, Tom attempts to explain to Claudia what his war is like. It involves "… moving a lot of heavy metal around and trying to kill people while avoiding being killed oneself" (201). It also includes boredom, intense fear, noise, exhaustion, a "primitive lust for chase" (196) -- and beauty. He writes about the awe he experiences when seeing about a gazelle "… somehow brilliant in the rock and scrub" (197). Claudia finds the beauty as well:

Perhaps I saw it for the first time that weekend in Luxor. It seems to me now that I did. I saw suddenly that it was beautiful. I saw the cluttered intense life of the fields and villages -- a world of dust and water, straw and leaves, people and animals -- and I saw the stark textural immensity of the desert, the sand carved by the wind, the glittering mirages. It had the delicacy of a water-colour -- all soft grey-greens and pale blues and fawns and bright browns. (75)

The ugliness of death and war and poverty, overlaid with beauty and love. This is the war Claudia and Tom try to understand -- and fail. "You tell me about gazelles and dead men, guns and stars, a boy who is afraid; it is all clearer to me than any chronicle of events but I cannot make sense of it, perhaps because there is none to be made," Claudia says (207). For most of us, war itself is hard to fathom. The pain and horror and death are difficult to grasp, and so we use the code words and Hollywood images cited above as an attempt to make sense of it all. But Lively shakes us from those predictable images, to remind us that war is much more than that -- and, at its core, it is senseless.

It turns out, then, that my aunt was only partially correct. The novels she chose do indeed challenge the center, but they do it not by privileging the periphery; rather they show that the center itself is a myth. It's all periphery. When Scott wrote Waverley, his objective was to capture the spirit of the age, and that necessarily forced him to find common factors -- behaviors, attitudes, beliefs -- that unite a group of people and turn them into a kind of "center." Postmodernism eschews that endeavor. Chatterton might not have been the tragic suicide, but a normal young man who made a deadly mistake. Flaubert thought about a lot of trivial things, just like the rest of us do. War is not just battle strategies and the images Hollywood provides us with, but is essentially much more -- and also much less. We begin to realize that real people and famous events don't often fit into the conventional stereotypes we've been trained to identify them with.
The center doesn't hold. In the words of Beverley Southgate, "We are left with the alternative inevitability of multiple perspectives from an infinity of centers" (45). And that's a good thing.
Chapter 5

TICK TOCK!

I'm haunted by the end of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. After finding the play in my aunt's box, I read it through in one sitting, and now I can't seem to stop thinking about it. *Arcadia* alternates between the present and the early nineteenth century, with all the action taking place in the same room at a country manor house. Here is Stoppard's note regarding this staging:

> Something needs to be said about this. ... Both periods must share the stage of the room, without the additions and subtractions which normally would be expected. The general appearance of the room should offend neither period. ... During the course of the play, the table collects this and that, and where an object from one scene would be an anachronism in another (say a coffee mug) it is simply deemed to have become invisible.

(26)

The present day occupants of the room include Hannah, an author researching the Sidley Hermit, who reportedly lived in the hermitage on the estate in the early nineteenth century; Bernard, an academic following a wild theory that Lord Byron killed fellow poet Ezra Chater during a duel at the estate; and Valentine, a son of the house who is doing scientific research on grouse. As our researchers discover evidence, which they invariably misinterpret, we are privileged with a view of the events as they occurred in the past in alternating scenes. There we learn not only about the actual confrontation (or rather non-confrontation) between Byron and Chater, but also about Thomasina, Valentine's ancestor who was a young genius far ahead of her time, and Septimus, her tutor, who discovers Thomasina's acumen.

It is the final act that I can't forget. As Hannah, Bernard and Valentine think they have finally begun to discover the truth about what happened almost 200 years ago, the time periods begin to blur together. While Hannah and Valentine are bent over the table, Thomasina and Septimus enter and begin to discuss Thomasina's premature discovery of the theory of the second law of thermodynamics, while at the same time Valentine is describing the theory to Hannah. At one point, "Septimus and Valentine study the diagram [that Thomasina has made to explain her discovery] doubled by time" (131). Thomasina's response to her pronouncement of what is essentially the end of the world is to implore Septimus to dance with her.
Meanwhile, Gus, Valentine's silent brother, presents Hannah with the evidence she's been looking for: a drawing of Septimus -- her hermit, because as the audience and all the present-day characters now believe, Thomasina will die in a fire later that night and Septimus will be driven by grief to take to the hermitage where he will attempt to continue Thomasina's work, producing "…hundreds of pages. Thousands. … He'd covered every sheet with cabalistic proofs that the world was coming to an end" (43). Gus extends his hand to Hannah for a dance as well. "After a moment's hesitation, she gets up and they hold each other, keeping a decorous distance between them, and start to dance, rather awkwardly. Septimus and Thomasina continue to dance, fluently, to the piano. End" (137). Past and present, interweaving together in a waltz. The scene still sends a chill up my spine.

Ackroyd does something similar in Chatterton. The entities of Thomas Chatterton, George Meredith and Charles Wychwood all seem to be interwoven somehow and able to escape the bounds of time. Charles first becomes aware of another presence when he awakens in a garden after he has been sick and sees that "… a young man was standing beside him. He had red hair, brushed back. He was gazing intently at Charles" (47). Their conversation is brief but promises another meeting between the two, a meeting that will take place in the restaurant when Charles suffers his final collapse: "His attention was distracted by someone standing behind her; he made an effort to rise from his chair, as he muttered, 'Yes, of course. I know you very well'" (152). What makes this encounter more interesting is that Harriet Scrope (who admittedly has consumed a significant amount of gin) also sees the apparition. She's not alone, for it is possible that Philip, too, has seen a young Chatterton as he walks through St. Mary Redcliffe: "And I am seeing again, Philip thought, what Thomas Chatterton himself once saw as a child" (54). At that moment he notices a boy and a young man in the church with him. The boy begins to play the organ, astonishing Philip. "He had seemed too young to be drawn to so melancholy a pursuit but, when Philip stood up and walked past the ironwork screen, the boy's face was so rapt that he might have been listening to the sounds of his own life echoing back to him" (55). George Meredith also has two brushes with Chatterton. In a dream Meredith recounts to Henry Wallis, he passes Chatterton on the stairs. When he asks Wallis, "'What does that signify?'", Wallis responds: "'I believe stairs are an emblem. What was your word? Stairs are an emblem of time'" (139). In yet another uncanny encounter, Philip reads an account of George Meredith,
who, during an attempted suicide, was "… saved for literature by the intervention of the ghostly Thomas Chatterton" (71). A busy ghost, our Chatterton.

But Ackroyd seems to imply that Chatterton isn't really a ghost. There's something else going on here, something that has to do with the warping or perhaps even the dissolution of time itself. This is the account of Chatterton's death:

The silence that follows is never broken and now, when he looks up, he sees ahead of him an image edged with rose-colored light. It is still forming, and for centuries he watches himself upon an attic bed, with the casement window half-open behind him, the rose plant lingering on the sill, the smoke rising from the candle, as it will always do. I will not wholly die, then. Two others have joined him -- the young man who passes him on the stairs and the young man who sits with bowed head by the fountain -- and they stand silently beside him. I will live forever, he tells them. They link hands, and bow towards the sun." (233-34)

The description of the room echoes the painting of his death, which seems to suggest that he will live on through the immortality of art. But what are we to make of the presence of the other two figures who are presumably Charles and Meredith? Chatterton's death occurs before Charles or Meredith were even born. Can spirits go forward and backward? Or is Ackroyd challenging our notion of time? Without time there is simultaneous eternity in which Chatterton, Charles and Meredith can all exist at once, linked by a bond we can't quite understand.

Contemplating it makes my head ache. I wondered what Neo thought about the concept of time.

"Does time exist?" I instant messaged.

His prompt response was, "Yes and no."

"You're sounding quite postmodern," I chided.

"Okay. How's this? What we think of time -- minutes, hours, months -- that's all artificial. We invented those increments. They're arbitrary. Days and years I'll grant, since they record something physical with the rotation of the earth, but the rest could be anything. There could be 10 hours to a day
instead of 24. A month really should be 28 days to match the lunar cycle. So why are some months 30 days, others 31, and one 28 or 29? Only because we say so."

"In other words, if the way we count time is made-up, then time itself is made-up?"

"No," came the answer. "I think there has to be such a thing as time. It's what separates us in space. Like in your play, Arcadia. Imagine how many things happened in that one room over all those years. It's a single space. Without time, what separates everything?"

"It's kind of a scary thought, isn't it? Everyone bumping into each other."

"What really gives me the heebies is that thought of constantly bumping into myself. All those simultaneous me's sitting at this computer at once."

I involuntarily shivered.

Still, I wanted to understand what the postmodernists thought about time. Beverley Southgate seems to concur with Stoppard and Ackroyd's view that "For the postmodernist, past, present and future seem to merge" (13). He suggests that time merely gives us a stable structure since others, like me, find the concept of being outside of time too scary to contemplate. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth agrees that time "is a construct" (26). She explains that, "When we take the historical medium for granted, what we are really doing is accepting and reinscribing the belief -- and it is nothing more or less than an arbitrary and breathtaking collective act of faith -- that it is our powers of collective agreement that literally make possible historical continuity" (28-29). Her argument seems to be that we prefer to exist within this illusion of historic, linear time because it allows us to ignore death. In her words: "To exist in historical ('inauthentic') time is to exist as nobody and thence, Heidigger's logic goes, to act like an immortal" (35). Yet this is the opposite of what Ackroyd is suggesting. For him, it is an existence outside of linear time that allows Chatterton, Charles and Meredith to experience immortality. Linear time, with its insistence on an individual timeline that begins at birth and ends at death, would, to me, only serve to reinforce our sense of mortality.

Reading Ermarth only served to confuse me more, so I went back to Southgate, and found an explanation for postmodernism's challenge to linear time that makes more sense. "Chronological sequence," he states, "often defies human experience. It runs counter to our jumbling of past and present,
when memories intrude and overlap, and throw into ambiguity even supposedly straightforward apprehensions" (137). This is exactly what Claudia is talking about in *Moon Tiger*. Linear time may well exist "out there" but it ceases to exist "in here" in our memories. When Claudia recalls the time she spent with Tom in the Nile valley, she confesses that "... it is the feeling that survives; feeling and the place. There is no sequence now for those days, no chronology -- I couldn't say at which point we went to Karnak, to the Colossus, to the tombs -- they are simultaneous" (73). Claudia's narrative reinforces this theme; it, too, is presented as a kaleidoscope rather than a chronology. Her memories begin with childhood, then jump to the post-war years. Our first knowledge of Tom comes from a recollection of their stay at the Winter Place; 15 pages later we hear of their first meeting, when all she sees is "... just his hand on the driving-wheel, a brown hand with a scatter of black hairs between wrist and knuckles" (87). Few of us have little date stamps next to each memory and can replay the scenes of our lives like a slideshow. I can't possibly recollect every moment of all those me's sitting here at this computer. In a way, whether I'm comfortable with the thought or not, I do tend to blend and bump into myself quite often.

*Moon Tiger*, though, stays true to the thesis that, rather than bemoaning a loss of something, these books find a way to celebrate it. For Claudia, the loss of linear time becomes a positive thing:

Sixty-seven-year-old Claudia, on a pavement awash with packaged American matrons, crying not in grief but in wonder that nothing is ever lost, that everything can be retrieved, that a lifetime is not linear but instant. That, inside the head, everything happens at once. (68)

What it means for Claudia is that Tom never really dies because he remains a part of her within her memories. Time cannot really separate them that way. This again seems to refute Ermath's claim that we seek immortality through historical time.

Claudia is wrong, however, about chronologies not existing within our heads. Chronologies can't exist independently outside of our heads; they are imposed onto history by those who construct them. Julian Barnes understands this. Take a look at the three different chronologies he presents in *Flaubert's Parrot*. In "Chronology I" we see a positive portrait of Gustave Flaubert's life, beginning with his birth into a "... successful professional middle class" family with "... a stable, enlightened, encouraging and normally
ambitious background" (23). We learn of his friendships, his academic success, his sexual success, his writing triumphs. His epileptic attacks prove positive "… since his confinement brings both the solitude and the stable base needed for a life of writing" (25). In 1880, "… Full of honour, widely loved, and still working hard to the end, Gustave Flaubert dies at Croisset" (27). It's the kind of chronology we approve of, a glowing picture of our admired artist. But wait. There's a second chronology that begins not with Flaubert's birth, but with the previous deaths of two of his siblings and is followed by the death of another. Flaubert himself is not anticipated to survive. The deaths of family and friends will plague him throughout his short life. He is expelled from one school and fails at another. His sexual exploits lead to venereal disease. His career seems doomed before it even starts: "After an embarrassed consultation, the listeners [of "his first full-length adult work"] tell him to throw it on the fire" (29). His epileptic attacks are described as "shattering" (28). In 1880, "…Impoverished, lonely and exhausted, Gustave Flaubert dies" (31). Not quite the same flattering story, is it? Yet both are true.

There's a third chronology, which neither contradicts nor complements the other two. It contains only quotes from Flaubert's correspondence, with the year they were written. The years seem somewhat irrelevant; one must search for any sort of progression of attitude. Flaubert begins, in 1842 during his student days, by likening himself and his books to "… a gherkin in its vinegar" (32). He concludes in 1880 by describing himself as "… liquefying like an old Camembert" (32-37). Unappetizing food metaphors are curiously scattered throughout. Flaubert, in a distasteful analogy, likens himself to "… a runny, stinking macaroni cheese, which you have to eat a lot of times before you develop a true taste for it" (33). This chronology seems to better express the real Flaubert. But the food references make me weary. Was Flaubert truly obsessed with pungent foods, or has Barnes' selection put an emphasis that perhaps shouldn't be there? Do these three chronologies tell me more about Flaubert or about the construction of chronology itself?

Amy Elias concludes that what chronologies like Barnes' do is to recreate history as paratactic; in other words, they remove the element of cause and effect. Elias states:

IIronically, because this chronology lacks the components of story such as plot or theme, the reader becomes aware that such story elements permeate the actual historical record.
Because this chronology lacks connectives, it prods the reader to reexamine what connectives are in the context of a historical record. (126-27)

In other words, we should question how we have traditionally told our histories. Do historians simply impose the connectives themselves as they write about history? As Barnes shows, we would be wise not to trust chronologies. You are surprised, perhaps? What about all those history quizzes, you ask. All those chronologies we had to memorize as school children, with our teachers implying that if we only knew the dates and events we would become the masters of history. 1492. 1776. Sure, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. America declared her independence from Great Britain. But what about all the things that chronologies fail to say? What's been left out? Over-emphasized? Mis-connected?

But there's a positive spin to this issue of multiple chronologies, as well. Through them, we can view time as multi-linear rather than linear. A multi-linear chronology allows for the two different perspectives of Flaubert's life, for instance. All alternatives for looking at something become equality valid; once again, "If there were no truths, everything was true" (127). Multi-linear time also allows for multiple voices to share the same stage. In Arcadia, characters from 1812 and the present blend together. Elias discusses this strategy in terms of "Foucaultian respatialized history" (110), which allows for a layered history, similar to varying ocean currents or geological strata. She explains that:

Constructing history this way allows for history paradoxically to repeat itself as difference. To put it crudely, one layer of history may backtrack while another moves forward, thus allowing repetition of history to occur, but as a trace, or as difference, because it is highly improbable that the exact conjunction of all layers will be repeated at any two historical moments. (111)

Thus in Arcadia, Thomasina is able to describe, but not prove, the second law of thermodynamics, more than 100 years before its official discovery, and the conversations between the eras become shared, simultaneous but slightly different:

Valentine: She saw why. You can put back the bits of glass, but you can't collect up the heat of the smash. It's gone.

Septimus: So the Improved Newtonian Universe must cease and grow cold. Dear me.
Valentine: The heat goes into the mix.

Thomasina: Yes, we must hurry if we are going to dance.

Valentine: And everything is mixing the same way, all the time, irreversibly…

Septimus: Oh, we have time, I think.

Valentine: … till there's no time left. That's what time means.

Septimus: When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore.

Thomasina: Then we will dance. (132)

Yes, there's a paradox here. Would it be postmodern if there weren't? Times may be portrayed as happening simultaneously or on multiple planes, but if Thomasina and Valentine are correct, one day it will cease. A.S. Byatt notes this troubling contradiction, as well, stating that, "the interest common to all of them, in linear time and the finiteness of the single biological life, is always accompanied by some teasing or puzzling image of infinity and indestructibility" (On Histories 28). Characters from different eras can share the same space, as do Hannah, Valentine, Thomasina and Septimus and Chatterton, Meredith and Charles, suggesting an ability to escape time. Yet the second law of thermodynamics refutes that possibility: If time is finite, it must also be linear. So what is the appropriate postmodern response to this dilemma? To dance, of course.
Chapter 6

PROBLEMATIZING THE SUBLIME

Dr. Braithwaite isn't very fond of literary critics. One can hardly blame him, I suppose. His chief allegation against them seems to be their annoying tendency to seek out and expose minuscule mistakes. Do such errors really matter to the general reader, he wonders? Are most readers even aware of the blunders? And -- his worse charge against the critics -- are the proposed mistakes even there? In her efforts to distinguish her own scholarly reputation by accusing Flaubert of giving Emma three different eye colors, thereby deriding his ability to "build up characters" (Parrot 80), Dr. Enid Starkie apparently omitted from her argument key descriptors in the text. Lazy reading or deliberate decision on her part? Dr. Braithwaite, perhaps too kindly, insinuates that she was just careless and didn't closely read the text. But as we all know, authors, even literary critics, make conscious decisions about how to construct their texts. It's entirely possible that, since the evidence didn't fit her thesis, Starkie simply neglected to produce it. Just be wary of the literary criticism you read would be my suggestion. Besides, I digress. This chapter isn't supposed to be a discussion of how trustworthy literary critics might or might not be. And, at any rate, if I had a compliant with literary critics it would differ from Dr. Braithwaite's.

Because, I admit, I do have an issue with literary critics, especially those who wrote about postmodern theory postmodernism during the latter part of the 20th century. Basically, I ask you, why did they all feel compelled to be so unintelligible? Here's an example I stumbled across the other day:

In this contradictory, truly agonistic movement, from deferment to the possibly nostalgic quest for presence, from the exhausted logic of analogy to the rediscovery of the metaphorical violence of language, from the mirror chamber of simulacra to another definition of simulacrum as pharmakos, from an excessive organicity to a mode of writing that would be organic in its very excess, from the crisscrossing of analogy to representation as "cruci-fiction" (Regard 54), allegory is eventually unhinged and breaks down against the jagged shores of what could be defined as a renewed kind of sublime.

(Bernard 176)
Deep breath, followed by "huh?" First you've got to untangle the sentence itself, then define the words, then try to figure out just what the heck it all means. And by then, you'll have to go searching for the aspirin or a good stiff drink.

Once the aspirin and/or alcohol kick in, I'll try to figure out just what "sublime," not to mention that whole passage, does mean. I'll let you know how it goes when we get to Elias, who wrote an awful lot about the sublime. Hopefully we'll be able to figure it out by then. Because we do need to read Elias. I promised the scholars their own chapter, didn't I? Unfortunately, we'll have to content ourselves with the expected scholarly critical analysis rather than a snippy commentary against critics, which seems fated to be Dr. Braithwaite's territory rather than mine. I'll start with an attempt to define postmodernism as it was understood during the last twenty years of the twentieth century when the texts I'm concentrating on were written, then keep narrowing the focus through metafiction to what Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" and Elias labels "metahistorical romance."

Postmodernism: Projecting a Definition

When it comes to defining postmodernism, it appears that during the late twentieth, the only thing critics agreed on was the difficulty of arriving at a definition everyone could agree on. The basic problem of delineation, as Brian McHale pointed out in Postmodernist Fiction, is that postmodernism isn't a "real" thing. It and other such movements are "all literary-historical fictions, discursive artifacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians. And since they are discursive constructs rather than real-world objects, it is possible to construct them in a variety of ways" (4). In other words, we're all making it up as we go along. Complicating matters, critics are also creating definitions of postmodernism at the same time postmodernism itself is evolving -- in the thick of things, as it were, rather than from a comfortable distance in the future. Thus Ihab Hassan notes that one of the problems of definition is postmodernism's "brash adolescence" ("Question" 32). One thing the critics do acknowledge is that postmodernism is probably something that comes after modernism, hence the "post," but that doesn't really help unless you know what modernism was.
There is a little more consensus on that subject (though perhaps not as much as one would expect), and to help explain modernism I want to briefly turn to an obscure academic who had a knack for describing such terms in a way her students could comprehend and who posted them on her website for others to appreciate. (Postmodernism does, after all, admonish us to seek out those on the fringes, while eschewing the center.) Mary Klages lists the main characteristics of the literary modernism movement as: 1) an emphasis on how we perceive, not what we perceive; 2) a rejection of an objective third person narrator with a fixed point of view and an unequivocal moral stance; 3) a blurring of genres; 4) usage of fragments, discontinuity, randomness and collage; 4) a distinct self-consciousness about participating in the act of constructing art; 5) a tendency toward minimalism, spontaneity and discovery; and 6) a rejection of the differentiation between "high" and "low" forms of art. To this list, McHale would have added: "the multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives, the focalization of all the evidence through a single 'center of consciousness' … virtuoso variants on interior monologue … dislocated chronology, withheld or indirectly -- presented information, difficult 'mind-styles,' and so on" (Postmodernist Fiction 9-10). However, with the exception of "a single 'center of consciousness,'" most of these terms could easily apply to many postmodern novels. So, if postmodernism is not a rejection of modernism, what sets the two apart?

For Klages, the answer lies in the attitude the author takes toward what both movements see as the breakdown of meaning in the current human condition. While a modernist author despairs over this loss and still believes that art can impose a sorely needed and lacking sense of order, a postmodernist author not only accepts the breakdown into chaos, but celebrates it. Borrowing from Baudrillard, the postmodern attitude can be summed up as: "The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense" (Klages). McHale sees the distinction differently. For him, the dominant of modernism is epistemological. Modern authors are concerned with questions of knowledge: What can and can't be known? Who can know it? How? With what certainty? Postmodernism, on the other hand, is concerned with ontological issues. The questions it asks are thus:

What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and
what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (10)

Since postmodern writers accept that there are limits to what we can know (and obviously got tired of asking questions they couldn't answer), they turn instead to fictionalizing possible worlds. As McHale cites several times, postmodern texts, like Oedipa in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, ask, "shall I project a world?" (10) and proceed to do just that.

In postmodernism, the boundary between fictional and real worlds begins to blur. For example, the author makes it clear that the fictional world is an artifact, not a mirror of the real world, by entering the text to comment on the process of creating the text. Real people, besides the author, often make appearances in the fictional world. Characters from one text appear in another. This act of foregrounding the projection of fictional worlds serves to highlight the constructedness not only of the fictional worlds, but also of real worlds, according to McHale. Using an idea proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, he states that "reality [is] a kind of social fiction, constructed and sustained by the processes of socialization, institutionalization, and everyday social interaction, especially through the medium of language" (37). Thus reality isn't something concrete, out-there, a given; it is instead something we create, and we need to be aware of it as such. To further complicate matters, it is no longer "reality," but rather "realities," for there are as many of those as there are definitions of postmodernism.

McHale outlines a number of strategies that postmodern authors use, including presenting a world then erasing it; giving multiple or unclose d endings; nesting stories within stories to deliberately mislead readers into thinking the second story is more "real" than the first; creating characters who are aware of themselves as characters; using hesitating metaphors; and foregrounding style, discourse and actual typography to show that all are just linguistic constraints. Most of the works he cites pre-date 1980 and few are by British authors. All are, to varying degrees, highly experimental -- in other words, not very similar to the post-1980 British historical novels in which this thesis is interested. McHale does provide, however, an interesting discussion of historical fiction.

For him, there is an "ontological scandal" (85) when real people from history enter the pages of a fictional world and communicate with fictional characters. In traditional historical fiction, authors follow
several rules: the story cannot "contradict 'official' historical record," though it might play within "dark areas" such as the unrecorded thoughts of the historical personage; there can be no anachronisms; and the fictional world has to share the same "logic and physics" of the historical world portrayed (87-88). Postmodern authors often break these rules. They supply alternative scenarios of what might have happened and focus on those not represented in the traditional histories (women, minorities, the losing side, etc.). They deploy "creative anachronism" by placing thoughts from a current era into the past, forcing readers to see both past and present at once. Ultimately, they ask us to question the fictional status of history itself:

In postmodern revisionist historical fiction, history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional and fiction becoming "true" history -- and the real world seems to get lost in the shuffle. But of course this is precisely the question postmodern fiction is designed to raise: real, compared to what? (96)

Since McHale ended his chapter on that provocative question, I think we, too, will end there.

One other academic we should touch on, though, before we turn our attention to the next subject -- metafiction -- is Ihab Hassan, who began writing about postmodernism almost from its toddler state. Hassan, too, discusses the difficulty of defining the movement, concluding that "any definition of postmodernism calls upon a four-fold vision of complementarities, embracing continuity and discontinuity, diachrony and synchrony" ("Question" 33). What I think he means to say is that postmodernism is a continuation of -- and a break with -- modernism, and that as a literary "period," it is a social construction, as we saw earlier with McHale. Hassan offers his own useful "catena of postmodern features," including: "indeterminancies … fragmentation … decanonization … self-less-ness, depth –less-ness … the unpresentable, unrepresentable … irony … hybridization … carnivalization … performance, participation … constructionism … immanence" ("Pluralism" 504-508). Hassan rounds out his definition by supplying the following "paratactical proposition":

As an artistic and philosophical, erotic and social phenomenon, postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silences --
veers toward all these and yet implies their very opposites, their antithetical realities. (It is as if *Waiting for Godot* found an echo, if not an answer, in *Superman.*) ("Question" 35-36)

It is clear from Hassan's comments that postmodernism is not easily defined because, by its very nature, it eludes definition; it thrives on ambiguity and absurdity, rejects any efforts toward totality or authority, simultaneously embraces and discredits various genres it freely borrows from, and ultimately never forgets that it is only a construction of language, subject to polyphony and perspectivism.

Metafiction: Questioning the Fictionality of Reality

According to Patricia Waugh, in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, the principle feature of a metafictional text is the foregrounding of the fictionality of the text. To accomplish this, a number of devices might be used. Authors may directly address the reader and write about the act of writing the words the reader is reading. Characters may become aware that they are characters, victims of the "creation/description paradox" -- they "exist" because we can talk about them, but they are merely fictional constructs and as such don't "exist." These characters are also shown explicitly playing roles and obeying fictional rules. Beginnings and endings are often problematized. Narratives begin, hesitate, stop and start all over again. Multiple endings may be supplied. All of these strategies serve to remind the reader that what is being read is not real; it's merely a verbal construct.

Parody is the primary tool of metafiction since it provides a means to "… expose levels of illusion" (33) and highlight the text's constructedness, artifice and impermanence. Traditional readers expect a familiar format of realism -- the novel as a representation of reality. Metafiction fulfills this expectation by using realism as a parodic source. But then the parody undermines the realistic format and its conventions that have become "automated and inauthentic" (65), in the process creating something new. According to Waugh, "Parody fuses creation with critique to replace, as one observer has remarked, what had become 'a matter of course' with what now becomes a 'matter of discourse'" (68).

Waugh cites four different levels of metafiction, ranging from minimal to quite radical. On the first level we find authors examining "… fictionality … through the thematic exploration of characters
'playing roles' within fiction" (116). This genre is much closer to realism than that seen in the more radical forms, with little concern shown for linguistics or the ontological status of fiction, though reality is "flexible enough" to occasionally depart from "its norm" (116). The next level features characters who are aware they are trapped in someone else's order, be it God or the author or even language itself. These works reject both realism and extreme fabulation, and instead project a world that provides a new perspective on the "real" world. At the third level, the text has moved closer towards seeing both itself and the world as linguistic constructions by explicitly admitting to telling a story, even commenting on the construction of the story, and by "exaggerat[ing] authorial presence" (131). Ultimately "… the 'author' discovers that the language of the text produces him or her as much as he or she produces the languages of the text" (133). By the fourth level, texts have dissolved into language games. American authors tend more toward the radical spectrum, while British writers primarily stay within the first levels. According to Waugh:

In most British writing the problem [of representation] tends to be explored thematically, or through macro-structures like plot and narrative voice. The problem of 'absence' is here an extension of the notion that a fictional world is created by a real author through a series of choices about the deployment of linguistic units, but nevertheless in some sense constitutes a version of the everyday world. (57)

So why do metafiction writers foreground fictionality? Neither parody nor the self-reflexive features outlined above are new to metafiction, of course, but what sets metafiction apart from earlier self-reflexive works is its motivation for using such devices. By questioning the relationship between fiction and reality, metafiction authors hope to make readers question the fictionality of reality and confront their world, not as a given, but as a social construction -- a social construction, moreover, that is always in flux and that can be altered for the better. Like McHale, Waugh sees discourse as the main building block of reality, or rather multiple realities. Citing Berger and Luckmann as well, Waugh describes reality as being manufactured through the "… interrelationship of apparently 'objective facticities' in the world with social convention and personal or interpersonal vision" operating within "… particular historical structures of power and frameworks of knowledge" and continually changing, so that "reality" is experienced as "… a web of interrelating, multiple realities" (51). It is through language that humans not only create their world,
but also maintain the illusion of it as something "real." Thus by breaking down language, we can begin to see behind the illusion.

A crucial aspect of this analysis is the proposition that by using language we can ultimately challenge or change the world. Saussure identified signifiers and signifieds -- words and "concepts evoked by [those] word[s]" (4). Since they have no fixed link to the actual object, signifieds can shift; meaning thus changes -- and reality changes. When we use words in new ways we intentionally attempt to modify our worlds. The novel, itself a construct produced through discourse, is the perfect vehicle to illustrate how the world is constructed and modified by language. Waugh states that:

What writers like Fowles are hoping is that each reader [revises his or her ideas about the philosophical status of what is assumed to be reality] with a new awareness of how the meanings and values of that world have been constructed and how, therefore, they can be challenged or changed. (34)

The implication here is much different from Klages' assertion that postmodernism has given up any moral responsibility to reform. The above quote seems to indicate that at least some metafictional writers, rather than simply celebrating chaos, advocate social reform, or as Waugh frames it, "potentially constructive social criticism" (11).

Historiographic Metafiction: Installing and Subverting History

Linda Hutcheon has developed her own "poetics" of postmodernism. In a nutshell, Hutcheon believes:

Postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. Contesting in this way such concepts as aesthetic originality and textual closure, postmodern art offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a
position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe. (23)

She has coined a term for this trend in literature: historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon shares with McHale and Waugh the underlying ideology that what we call "reality" is a social construction, based upon language. For Hutcheon, postmodernism does not set out to deny "reality," for something does indeed exist out there, nor wish to replace "reality" since it acknowledges our need for signifying systems of some sort to help us make sense of the world. Rather postmodern artists believe that "reality" simply should be exposed for what it really is -- not centralized, totalized, hierarchical, closed, continuous, universal, eternal or naturally given, but provisional, multiplicitious, temporary and -- most importantly -- culturally determined. The goal becomes not the replacement of one signifying system by another totalizing structure, but simply the attainment of knowledge via questioning and challenging the existing systems. Postmodernism requires readers to be active participants rather than passive recipients in this quest for knowledge by deliberately not offering any answers to the problems exposed in the existing systems, thereby forcing readers to contemplate their own assumptions about possible alternatives.

Hutcheon's major contribution to the postmodern debate is her assertion that history, specifically our attitudes toward how we can know and tell about history, is a central preoccupation of postmodernism. While modernism (at least in architecture) saw history as a cultural burden to be thrown-off in the march toward technological progress, postmodernism brings back history as something "… significant and even determining" (89), but it does so from within a problematized context. History becomes provisional and indeterminate, with the prevailing questions being "how can we know that past today -- and what can we know of it?" (92). Key to this position is that postmodernism perceives history, as it does reality, as a human construct, or rather, in the case of history, as a re-construction since all we have of history is written accounts -- written, furthermore, from a particular perspective (if not out-right bias). As with "reality," postmodernism does not assert that history did not exist; what it tries to do instead is foreground the constructedness of what many people assume is uncontested truth in the history books. History itself, then, becomes a form of fiction. As Hutcheon states, history and fiction are both "discursive realities":
They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (105)

However Hutcheon is careful to note that history and fiction are not the same thing, though the line between the two quite often blurs, and it is within this blurry area that postmodern writers often play by installing the conventions of history, then paradoxically and self-consciously undermining them.

We can see some of this play in action through Hutcheon's examination of the differences between traditional (realistic) historical fiction and postmodern historiographic metafiction. Borrowing from Lukacs, Hutcheon says that traditional historical fiction sees history as "a shaping force" that defines a culture, and thus it presents readers with characters that "generalize and concentrate" that historic period (113). Postmodernism, on the other hand, does not acknowledge a cultural universality. Indeed, when postmodern literature does present a universal idea, it must expose that idea's inherent flaws. More often than not, then, postmodernism features the ex-centric -- those at the far margins of a now illusory center.

The stories that get told are the local or regional and the personal and particular since these are the only individual, provisional "truths" we can know. Postmodern "truth" is a highly problematized concept, a situation that is reflected in historiographic metafiction texts. In traditional historical fiction, details are given to show that the story is faithful to the historical record. In postmodern historical fiction, such details are undermined. Many narrators and characters are confronted with confusing evidence, and they lack any sense of confidence that they can truly know what happened in the past. Writers include overtly falsified details to show that errors in historical accounts do happen. In a similar vein, these writers also elevate historical personages from their traditional secondary roles, going so far as to invent their thoughts and conversations and often playing with known facts about them, all with the goal of getting readers to question their assumptions about the line between historical "fact" and fiction, to prod us to ask how we can ever know what really happened.
The ultimately unresolved blurring of history and fiction is just one example of the contradictory nature of postmodernism, which works from within the signifying system in order to critique and question that system, be it a genre, institution, ideology, language or the representation of history. Postmodernism "… asserts then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control and identity" (13), and it accomplishes this through the use of parody. Hutcheon shares this identification of parody as a central feature of postmodernism with Waugh, but Hutcheon inserts the element of irony. For her, parody is "… repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26). Unlike what we may typically think of as parody, which uses comedy or mockery to expose foolishness, postmodern parody depends upon irony to do its dirty work. Citing Umberto Eco, Hutcheon asserts that "… irony may be the only way we can be serious today. … We cannot ignore the discourses that precede and contextualize everything we say and do, and it is through ironic parody that we signal our awareness of this inescapable fact" (39). The use of parody also becomes an essential element of historiographic metafiction because it allows the writer to literally incorporate the texts of the past and hold them up for critical examination, while also highlighting the fact that texts are all we have of the past. Thus we find one of postmodernism's central paradoxes: it depends on that which it critiques. Or, as Hutcheon is fond of saying, it "uses and abuses." For the postmodern artist, nothing is sacred from this "use and abuse," not even art itself. Hutcheon cites David Caute when she states, "If art wants to make us question the 'world,' it must question and expose itself first" (36).

Though Hutcheon has been unquestionably influential to the analysis of postmodern literature, some critics have found cracks in her thesis. McHale, in his review of *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Politics of Postmodernism*, accuses Hutcheon of being irresolute due to her fear of projecting any sort of master narrative. He states, that "Linda Hutcheon's mistake, it seems to me, is to have thrown away the narrative along with the meta-narrative" ("Postmodernism" 30). He also questions her conjoining of postmodernism and historiographic metafiction which dictates that all postmodern texts must be only those which are preoccupied with history. McHale's concern appears justified given the heterogeneous scope of postmodern works of art that cannot all possibly be read as critiques of history. Ansgar Nunning agrees with McHale that Hutcheon has limited her definition to a point that leads to homogeneity; it "does not do
justice to the diversity, breadth, and scope of innovative development in contemporary historical fiction or in other forms of postmodernist (meta) fiction" (219-220). Hutcheon has nonetheless built a foundation for re-thinking postmodern works of fiction that do deal in some way with historical issues. Like Waugh, Hutcheon has also managed to place a positive spin on the seemingly hopeless morass of unanswerable questions that postmodernism poses. According to Hutcheon, "If we accept that all is provisional and historically conditioned, we will not stop thinking, as some fear; in fact, that acceptance will guarantee that we never stop thinking -- and re-thinking" (53). For some, though, the necessity of thinking might just be the most unsettling part of postmodernism.

Metahistorical Romance: Longing for Meaning in the Absence of History

In *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*, Amy Elias works from Hutcheon's assumption that our conception of historical knowledge is at the heart of postmodernism. She states in her Preface that, "In fact, philosophy, historiography, and literature have reunited at the locus of history. More than anything else, this intersection at the point of history is postmodernism" (xxviii). Despite this assertion, Elias limits herself to the historical fiction genre to demonstrate her analysis, thus she does not go as far as Hutcheon in restricting her definition of postmodernism itself. The focus of Elias' thesis is the historical sublime, which she defines as "a desired horizon that can never be reached but only approached in attempts to understand human origins and the meaning of lived existence" (xviii). According to Elias, the postmodern sublime is different from the modernist view of the sublime, which features "stability and centered meaning"; rather it is the Lyotardian sublime of "decentered absence" (56). For her the postmodern assumption of history as unpresentable results in a paradoxical state of skepticism toward the idea of historical truth and a longing for comfort that comes from understanding why things happened as a way to make sense of seeming chaos. She states:

What we live is the present; what we remember is the past; what is beyond that is History, and for all the efforts of scholars and researchers and novelists, History is untouchable, ultimately unknowable, and excruciatingly tantalizing as well as terrifying, for there resides Truth. (53)
Essentially we know we can't have it, but we still want it (maybe even more so because we can't have it). Elias compares this longing to a search for faith in a world where faith has been discredited, making the sublime secular and sacred. When postmodern historical fiction confronts this problem, what results is metahistory, "... the ability to theorize and ironically desire history rather than access it through discovery and reconstruction" (xvii). Elias thus dubs such novels "metahistorical romances."

Central to her thesis is the evolution of the historical romance novel genre that reflects the evolution of historiography, or the study and writing of history. She looks to Walter Scott as one of the first great historical romance writers and shows how Scott influenced and was influenced by the historiography of his time. During the nineteenth century, historians believed they could be impartial, logical, rational social scientists who could study history and determine its patterns. They saw historical time as linear and believed that humans were on a positivistic path of progress. Furthermore, for them, history was a force that shaped individual experience. Scott's novels reflect these beliefs, but at the same time he adds a contradiction: a nostalgia for a lost way of living that will never return, eradicated by the march of progress. Both Scott's novels and postmodern historical novels "... raise questions about how history can be narrated and what the relationship between historiography and fiction might be" (9). Postmodern novels elevate these questions, however, as they reflect the drastically altered anti-foundationalist historiography of their own time.

Elias spends several pages explaining the progression of historical thought through the twentieth century, first with the Annales School which assumes the social/cultural construction of reality and sees history not as linear but as "interlocking structures" (31). This school of thought focuses on ordinary people in history rather than just the great players, and most importantly, it posits that historians can never be unbiased. Late twentieth century historiography shares these assumptions and adds the familiar postmodern rejection of universal theories and empirical history, which leads to a problematic blurring of history and fiction. So while Scott mourns the loss of a society to the march of history, postmodernism mourns the loss "... for the past itself as a situating, grounding foundation for knowledge and truth" (23). What metahistorical romances do is acknowledge this loss of belief in the certainty of history, but they also cannot entirely accept its loss, resulting in the historical sublime.
Elias believes the postmodern era is shaped by a post-traumatic consciousness, one that has seen the horrors of two world wars and has begun to question its own "psychic, social and ideological problem[s]" (51). As such we must not repress history but confront it because we feel a need to make sense of the past in order to avoid making such mistakes again. This confrontation is positive in the sense that it attempts to provide "... an alternative to both the modern cultural narrative of first World progress and liberation and the modernist First World antinarrative of meaninglessness, socially disengaged psychic alienation, or presentist anti-history" (51). The metahistorical romance provides an "imagined community" where we can express our traumatic history. Its features include fragmentation, "problematized memory," and "competing versions of past events;" it resists closure and "... reveals a repetition compulsion in relation to the historical past." It is in essence "paradoxically a post-traumatic narrative that resists a narrativist mode of history" (52). Since we cannot look directly at the past using traditional empiricist methods, we confront the sublime instead, not articulating it but instead "feeling" it and "gesturing" to it. Elias emphasizes our need to continually "act out" and "work through" our trauma (53), but this confrontation with the sublime takes the forms of repetition and deferral. Characters repeatedly turn to the past, questioning the view that time is linear and attacking positivist Enlightenment history from two sides - - a conception of "a post-Einsteinian, quantum universe and a pre-Newtonian, mythic sense of history" (57). Though attempts at confrontation with the historical sublime are continually repeated, they are of necessity also continually deferred, since the sublime by its very definition is untouchable. Attempts then often take the form of allusion, which can be seen as "... the presenting of the unpresentable without presentation -- another way of saying that allusion is reference that defers reference" (60). Elias also links the sublime here with the "uncanny," the eerie events that often take place at the border of the sublime when past and present seem to meld and characters from different ages interact with each other.

She asserts that the motivation for this "unceasing deferral" is "... a simultaneous distrust and assertion of fabula as a humanist value" (69). Brain McHale questions her use of fabula in this manner, seeing it as not necessarily a humanist value if she is using it as the Russian formalists who coined the term do ("History Itself" 158). What she perhaps means is simply narrative, a significant term in the history-as-fiction debate. She does make some interesting points in this section about the fact that many metahistorical
romances do not take the form of the avant-garde, though they certainly say radical things about history. There has been an increasing shift away from the avant-garde and back to realistic narrative because, she states, "as poststructuralist theories about language become increasingly mainstreamed in literary culture, writers' faith in the ability of narrative form singlehandedly to rescue narrative from historical nostalgia or totalitarian politics is lessened, and therefore the need to produce avant-gardist form is lessened as well" (75).

The relationship between narrative and the presentation of history is a hotly contested one. Unlike many other literary critics (including Hutcheon), Elias touches upon both poles and some of the ideas in between. On one side, "… history is only self-referential language and there is no such thing as a referential or historical 'fact';" on the opposite side, "… history is only an unbiased accumulation of fact systematically linked through an empiricist methodology analogous to that used by the natural sciences" (77). Both of these poles are unacceptable to most working historians, who work somewhere in between these ideologies. Still, the formulation that is most often adopted by that of literary critics (including Elias) is that of Hayden White, who, using a position closest to the "history is only self-referential language" theory, argues that narrative is not a given, but is imposed by historians in the act of writing history, and as such history and fiction are closer that most prefer to accept. Writers therefore look to narrative as a way to impose order on the chaos of history, but at the same time understand that it is an arbitrarily imposed order, encumbered with bias and never absolutely "True."

Elias' final proposition is that "… writers of metahistorical romance learn from the texts of the literary modernists to combine metahistory with narrative form, but the postmodern metahistoricity is situated differently as a tropological reversal of the historical romance genre" (87). In other words, Elias disagrees with Hutcheon that postmodernism is a break from modernism; instead she posits that postmodernism is an evolution from modernism. As such, postmodernism borrows from modernism a preoccupation "with processes, effects or construction of history" (90), disrupted linear narration, elimination of the omniscient third-person narrator, and a highlighting of fragmented reality. Most importantly, postmodernism "… learns from its modernist precursors that memory, desire, and history are not separable" (96). The difference is that modernism focuses on "… psyche rather than on history" and
postmodernism instead asks "… what history itself might be" (90). The tropological reversal lies in the foregrounding of either historicity or romance:

To the postmodernist imagination, preoccupied by history and bombarded by whizzing shards of exploded cultural and epistemological metanarratives, there is something smelling of lavender and Victorian parlors about the way traditional historical novels approach history. Therefore, while Walter Scott's novels often attempt to mute their romantic elements and foreground their historicity or grounding in a realist representation of life, postmodernist meta-historical fiction often foregrounds or conspicuously incorporates fabulation/romance. (98)

The transition between the two becomes then more of a pendulum motion than a linear evolution. Realism (of the classic period) moves to abstraction (of the modernist period) to fabulation (of the postmodern period), and swings back again to realism, as we see from texts of the late twentieth century.

Avoiding a Conclusion

All writers make choices. That's one of the lessons that postmodernism teaches us. We become aware of what we choose to say -- and what we don't say. Derrida would suggest that what we don't say actually says more about us than what we do say. In this chapter, I've opted to focus on only certain critics and certain aspects of their arguments -- the things I feel are important to my comprehension of postmodernism. It is probably significant, though, that I haven't included any negative reports of postmodernism. Within the discipline of History, debate rages about whether or not postmodernism is a wonderful theory that will liberate the profession or is just a load of nonsense practiced by a handful of "deeply disillusioned intellectuals" (Appleby et al 206). Literary critics, on the other hand, might not be able to agree on a definition of postmodernism or locate its birth on a calendar, but for the most part they've accepted the existence of something called postmodernism. As we've seen, McHale, Waugh, Hutcheon and Elias all point out the positive effects that postmodernism can have. But here's a question, perhaps
misplaced after I've spent 20-some-odd pages trying to explain how postmodernism works in contemporary fiction, but important nonetheless: Does postmodern fiction even exist?

Michael Berube finds that the answer to this question is quite possibly "no." As he sees it, after teaching postmodern literature for more than ten years, the theory is great, but "the problem is with the fiction: It just isn't postmodern enough. And that, I've gradually come to realize, is because there really isn't any such thing as postmodern fiction -- at least not in the terms that most literary critics have proposed so far" (B4). It's an intriguing idea, one that Berube backs up by finding that most postmodern strategies aren't really postmodern; they can be found in literature from the modern period as well as in that written by Lawrence Stern in the eighteenth century. And to those detractors who claim that Stern was an oddity in his own time, Berube points out that postmodernism is still pretty much an oddity in its own time as well, as becomes evident when one looks at the New York Times Best Seller lists, and if you feel that the Times is not an appropriate representation of good literature, Berube adds, "More tellingly, there's nothing especially postmodern about most critically acclaimed writers of "quality fiction," either" (B4). He provides several examples. One must acknowledge that he does have a point.

I include Berube here at the conclusion intentionally to question the validity of all I've written so far because it seems the proper postmodern thing to do. Contradiction is, after all, a focal point of postmodernism according to Hutcheon. Plus, Lyotard would surely frown upon a nice, neat, tidy conclusion that summed everything up as the gospel truth. But is that not the major sin committed by all the literary critics cited here? Even though McHale accuses her of being too leery of proposing any totalizing theories, that's precisely what Hutcheon (and McHale and Waugh and Elias) do. It's their job. I doubt most publishers would accept a manuscript that in essence said something like, "Postmodernism might be a reflection of the historical sublime. Sometimes. Maybe. Or maybe not. I can find a couple of examples, but I've left out a lot of texts that don't exactly fit with my thesis." In other words, postmodern literary critics can talk about postmodernism, but they can't practice what they preach -- which might just call into question the usefulness of postmodernism. Or it may be that critical analyses that help to explain postmodernism are exempt from postmodern principles, or that theory is different from the practice of postmodernism by fiction writers, though according to Berube those fiction writers aren't exactly practicing
postmodernism. Then there's also that blurring of fiction and fact to take into account. If historical accounts can be deemed as fictional, might not literary criticism be fiction as well?

It makes one think, doesn't it? But isn't that the whole idea behind postmodernism? If we are to question the constructedness of all we hold dear, and if we are to start with art, don't we then necessarily have to question the critical theory itself? And refrain from making any universal assumptions or conclusions about it?
Chapter 7
CROSSTALK

I arrived early at the place des Carmes, holding my by now well-worn copy of Flaubert's Parrot. Above me stood the statue Julian Barnes had described so aptly through the words of Dr. Braithwaite: "the one crying cupreous tears, the floppy-tied, square-waistcoated, baggy-trouserered, straggle-moustached, wary, aloof bequeathed image of the man" (11). I found myself wondering where Barnes had stood when he looked up at the image of the author he'd admired. I knew that, like his narrator, he too had made the pilgrimage to the statue before discovering the existence of the competing parrots. What had he felt in the presence of the pompous visage above him? His original description of Flaubert, jotted down at the time in his notebook, was "… looking loftily upwards, with a sticking-out mustache, disdaining the game of boules being played beneath him" ("When Flaubert Took Wing" 2).

"Why does the writing make us chase the writer?" Dr. Braithwaite asks (12).

The boules players were absent, which was disappointing; it would have been nice to have discovered what boules was. In their absence, Flaubert seemed more imposing, more imperious than either of Barnes' descriptions. He looked as if he had just smelled something offensive -- me, perhaps, the amateur critic with an aspiration to be an author. One of his hands rested in a coat pocket, fiddling perhaps his change. Did men in the nineteenth century carry loose coins in their pockets? I don't think Barnes mentions the hand placement. He does twice refer to the mustache, though. Looking at its shaggy protuberance, I was suddenly glad I wasn't facing the prospect of lunching with Flaubert.

I was lunching, however, with Dr. Braithwaite. It still seemed improbable even though I'd already managed somehow to be here in Rouen, staring up at Flaubert. Several days ago I'd been chatting online with Neo about the books my aunt had left me (after I'd asked him for the hundredth time how he was faring with the CD and he'd threatened to never look at it if I didn't promise to leave him alone). I thought it would be very interesting to actually be able to talk with Dr. Braithwaite and some of the other characters to find out what their reactions were to what the academics wrote -- and what my aunt might have written -- about their books.

"Why can't you?" Neo had asked.
"Well, I always supposed there were such things as laws of physics," I retorted.

"Just because you're in a thesis and not a novel doesn't make you any more real than they are. We're all fictional, kiddo. We live in the imagination. So just imagine yourself there. Voilà!"

He did have a point. Why not try it? After some consideration, I'd contacted Dr. Braithwaite by letter since he seemed to prefer that mode of correspondence. I explained the acquisition of my aunt's box of books and notes and expressed a desire to meet to discuss certain aspects of Flaubert's Parrot. Perhaps some characters from Moon Tiger and Chatterton might join us as well. I proposed that our topic might be whether or not these texts met Linda Hutcheon's requirements for historiographic metafiction, with a specific emphasis on the metafiction part. To my surprise, he responded very promptly and agreed to meet with me. We decided to invite Claudia from Moon Tiger and Philip from Chatterton. I think Dr. Braithwaite was both intrigued and intimidated by the prospect of meeting Claudia. I know I was. I felt rather safer including Philip.

I was still standing at the base of the statue that refused to return my gaze when Dr. Braithwaite joined me. He was loyal to his description: an elderly, distinguished man about six feet tall with shrewd brown eyes. He had the smooth hands of a doctor still as he took my hand and gently held it a moment. I gushed something about thanks and honor -- I'm not quite sure exactly what I said, but he remained polite and patient despite my excitable state. Philip and Claudia appeared next, Claudia striding forward in her emerald green tweed suit, looking to be in her late 30s, Philip trailing within her shadow. Greetings were exchanged.

"I hope you all like cheese," I said as we all began walking toward Rue des Carmes. It was a hike of several blocks to a restaurant Dr. Braithwaite had suggested when I admitted my fondness for la fromage, especially after his recommendations in the "Cross Channel" chapter of the book. The Au Temps des Cerises turned out to be more modern looking than I'd expected in this city that felt so ancient. The tables were draped in red, which complemented Claudia's attire as the other guests turned to watch us take our table. Best of all the Au Temps des Cerises specialized in la fromage from around the region: fondues, les feuilletines, les spécialités régionales, les raclettes. Since my French leaves much to be desired, I allowed the others to order for me. It all sounded wonderful, whatever it was.
But we weren't here just for cheese, and my guests had begun to look at me expectantly.

"I've been reading your books," I began. "Along with some notes and articles that my aunt left me. I'm interested in what some of the scholars have said about Flaubert's Parrot, Moon Tiger and Chatterton, especially Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction' to describe postmodern books that deal with history, like yours do. I don't know if you're familiar with her or not, but I thought we could talk about whether or not her assertions apply to your books."

"I know of the woman," Dr. Braithwaite acknowledged, his annoyance for academics barely hidden.

"I have heard of her, as well" Philip said gloomily. His fingers tugged at the edges of his beard, and I was grateful that it did not resemble Flaubert's.

"What exactly is her definition of historiographic metafiction?" Claudia inquired. Her field being history, she was less familiar with literary critics than the two men, one an amateur Flaubert scholar and the other a librarian.

I tried to quote from memory rather than dig through my bag for the books. "At one point she defines it as '… fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political' and at another point as '… those well known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflective and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages' (Poetics 4-5)."

"Well, I suppose it's nice to know someone thinks we're 'well known and popular,' but I'm not so sure about the rest," she remarked.

"It's interesting the words she chooses," I continued, nodding first to acknowledge Claudia. I wanted to stay on her good side. "'Historiography,' as I'm sure you know, has several different meanings. It can either refer to an historical write-up -- like the books Claudia writes -- or it can mean a special study of how different historians have approached a certain historical subject. I think she's using it in the first sense -- just writing about history, but I think it's really the second meaning that better describes what books like yours do: they question, well maybe not question per se, but look at how history gets told."

All three nodded in agreement as salad plates were set before us. I speared and savored a nugget of la chèvre before continuing.
"But what I thought we could discuss further was her use of 'metafiction' in the term. Put bluntly, do you think you're metafictional?" When they hesitated to answer, I continued: "For example, you do all have a heavy emphasis on the topic of writing and writers. Your subject is the writer Flaubert," I nodded to Dr. Braithwaite. "And you talk about what he wrote about, what critics thought of what he wrote about. You even have a section on books you'd ban if you were 'a dictator of fiction' (67). Claudia, you might not want to look at that part. And in Moon Tiger, there are also numerous references to the act of writing. You talk about how you'd write your history of the world. 'Not for me the cool level tone of dispassionate narration' (8), I think is how you put it. And Philip talks about how he'll write the Chatterton story his way. In addition, we see Charles writing poetry, Harriet worrying about whether she'll get caught plagiarizing plots, and Chatterton talking about inventing his medieval poet. It all makes the reader especially aware of the act of writing."

"However, when we talk about metafiction, aren't we usually talking about self-conscious fiction?" Philip asked his salad. "Where characters know they're characters?"

"I don't think any of us are portrayed that way," Claudia stated.

"No, we're certainly not characters in search of an author or anything ridiculous like that," Dr. Braithwaite agreed.

"True," I agreed, turning toward him. "You never do step out of the traditional frame, but you do make references that make us aware of the fact that you are aware you're writing the book we're reading. At one point when you're talking about Flaubert's dictionary, you ponder writing your own: 'It tempts me to write a Dictionary of Accepted Ideas about Gustave himself' (87). Thirty or so pages later, you mention it again: 'It's coming along well, by the way, Braithwaite's Dictionary of Accepted Ideas. All you need to know about Flaubert to know as much as the next person! Only a few more entries and I'll be finished. The letter X is going to be a problem, I can see. There's nothing under X in Flaubert's own Dictionary' (118-119). Then in Chapter 12, there's your dictionary -- with 'xylophone' as your entry for X."

"Ah, yes, that was an entertaining endeavor. I was tempted to leave X out but in the end I had the idea for the xylophone. However, I think we should point out that such techniques are certainly not new to the postmodern movement," Dr. Braithwaite challenged. "If we are indeed to be classified as postmodern."
"No, you're right, and I think the scholars would agree that metafiction isn't a recent development. I admit, though, that I was startled when I read Scott's *Waverley*, which was written in 1814. It begins with a surprisingly metafictional chapter in which Scott speaks about how his book should be viewed against others of its time. In an amusing tongue-in-cheek style, he defines the popular gothic romance, the mystical 'Romance from the German,' the 'Sentimental Tale' (which, with its '… heroine with a profusion of auburn hair' seems to be much like a twentieth century bodice-ripper without the illicit cover), and the contemporary 'Tale of the Times' (4). The references to writing don't stop there. While he sticks to a pretty straight-forward narrative style, he does intrude into the story at least six more times to comment upon the business of writing, including drawing our attention to the styles and strategies he employs and his use of an 'original' simile of which he is obviously proud (267)."

I reached down to my bag for my copy of *Waverley* at this point because there was one part I especially liked that I wanted to quote for them. "He begins one chapter by asking, 'Will this be a long or a short chapter?' In other words, will it be what the reader wants or what the author wants that counts? He continues: 'This is a question in which, you, gentle reader, have no vote, however much you may be interested in the consequences; just as you may (like myself) probably have nothing to do with the imposing a new tax, excepting the trifling circumstance of being obligated to pay it. More happy surely in the present case, since, though in lies within my arbitrary power to extend my materials as I think proper, I cannot call you into Exchequer if you do not think proper to read my narrative. Let me therefore consider (145).’ A few paragraphs later, he decides to be merciful and write a short chapter." I placed the book on the table and looked around for responses.

"Doesn't Patricia Waugh believe that what sets postmodern metafiction apart from traditional metafiction is the author's intention in using the technique?" Philip asked.

"Yes," I scrounged for Waugh's book. "She concludes that writers write about writing to show not only that books are constructed, but that reality is, too. Here's what she says, referring to the multiple endings in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: 'What writers like Fowles are hoping is that each reader does this [revise his or her ideas about what we assume to be reality] with a new awareness of how the meanings
and values of that world have been constructed and how, therefore, they can be challenged or changed' (34).

"Ah, thus the 'inescapably political' aspect," said Claudia drily.

"I think you all know how I feel about the subject," Dr. Braithwaite told us, and recited, "'When a contemporary narrator hesitates, claims uncertainty, misunderstands, plays games and falls into error, does the reader in fact conclude that reality is being more authentically rendered?' (89). Meaning, of course, that reality itself must be incorrect, uncertain, elusive, even perfidious. No, I don't think he does. And I don't think the alternative endings that Fowles uses are any more effective at producing such a conclusion."

I had to smile. "I really liked your alternative with the sealed envelopes. You have to pick the one you want then throw the rest away. I don't find you 'unreasonably literal-minded' (89)."

"Thank you," Dr. Braithwaite seemed pleased, then became stern again. "We've just talked about how Scott repeatedly draws attention to his act of writing *Waverley*. If Waugh is correct, then Scott's readers would also have been persuaded to doubt the 'reality' of the novel. I cannot think that was Scott's intention at all -- nor his readers' response. He was very concerned about portraying as true a portrait as he could of the Scottish people. He didn't believe in all this 'there is no truth' business that our time has become preoccupied with."

He did have a valid point. "Then why is there so much talk about writing in all these books?" I asked.

"I believe part of it is that writers are simply interested in examining the subject of writing. It's our craft, after all; it's what we live and breathe every day, so naturally we're somewhat preoccupied with exploring what it means to be writers. It amuses us," Claudia admitted.

"Our authors are not academics, after all," Dr. Braithwaite continued. "Authors and academics think differently at times."

I was reminded of his comment about the academic Dr. Snarkie: "She dressed like a matelot, walked like a scrum half and had an atrocious French accent" (79) and was thankful Dr. Braithwaite was showing remarkable restraint today given our topic.
At this point something arrived at the table dripping with melting cheese, and we were briefly distracted.

"Mary Hurley Moran maintains that *Moon Tiger* blurs '…the distinction between fiction and reality in order to show that reality is as much of a text as fiction is' (111). What do you think?" I asked.

"I don't know that I agree," Claudia responded. "I will say that reality is pretty much a muddle. It's my version against yours. That's what Lively is showing with her narrative structure that juxtaposes my thoughts next to my brother's, my lover's and my daughter's perceptions. The point is that what we perceive to be reality is relative to ourselves. But I'm not convinced that just because I'm sharing my thoughts about how I should write a history of the world, or that when my brother Gordon '… resents being axed from the narrative' (184), readers will have a flash of insight that everything is just words. Well, we here at this table, and I suppose this restaurant itself right now, are words, but I don't think Lively is going so far as to say reality itself is only words."

"Moran also suggests that '… Lively uses the realism-subverting device that Brian McHale calls "ontological flicker": a destabilizing of the ontology of the fictional world by an intrusion of the "real" world' (111). I would never have known this without reading the article, but supposedly the little girl who watches you and Tom at the zoo in Cairo is an insertion of Lively herself as a child into the narrative."

I think Dr. Braithwaite may have rolled his eyes, but I'm not positive.

Claudia herself snorted. "I think that's just Lively's way of having a little fun. Don't a lot of writers inject personal jokes into their works? Don't you have one in yours, Dr. Braithwaite?"

He chuckled now. "Yes, the author of that 'well-praised first novel' that mistakenly uses the term 'the first, suppressed edition of Madame Bovary' (78) is actually a reference to Julian Barnes."

"Oops."

"Yes, well, if you can't laugh at yourself…"

I tried to bring our metafiction issue back into focus. "So maybe the message is that, rather than 'reality,' what we think of as 'history' is just words."

"Yes, the tales of history we tell are definitely constructed by humans. Of course, as with 'reality,' that does not mean there isn't such a thing as history: 'When the times are out of joint it is brought
uncomfortably home to you that history is true and that unfortunately you are a part of it" (103), Claudia quoted herself.

"How are we supposed to be able to tell the difference between the real history and the constructed history?" I asked.

"Perhaps that is not the point," she replied.

"Your Hutcheon may have gotten a few things correct," Dr. Braithwaite admitted, which I think surprised all of us. "For one thing, does she not assert that we can only know the past through the textual evidence that has been left behind?"

"Yes," I went flipping through more pages. "She does say that one postmodern view that says history doesn't exist is wrong: 'History is not made obsolete; it is, however, being rethought -- as a human construct. And in arguing that history does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and 'gleefully' deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts' (16)."

"I think we could all agree with that assessment," he looked around, and the rest of us nodded.

"All that remains of [Flaubert] is paper. Paper, ideas, phrases, metaphors, structured prose which turns into sound' (12). That might be one reason we seem to be obsessed with writing. The message may well be, 'see, history is just words.'"

"But," added Claudia. "'Once it is all written down we know what really happened' (133)."

"Now you're just being facetious," Dr. Braithwaite accused.

Philip cleared his throat. "Harriet makes an interesting comment about history: 'It's the one thing we have to make up for ourselves' (226). That might also be the point."

"That does add an interesting layer of personal responsibility," I said. "Maybe what we're all trying to say is that history, being accessible to us only through words, which are moreover relative to those who wrote them and to those who read them, likely is not 'what really happened.'"

"And it's up to each of us to realize that and form our own judgments accordingly," Philip completed.
"That would correspond to Hutcheon's view that postmodernism wants 'us to be active, not passive, viewers' (32)." I rapidly flipped through more pages, excited now. "And that postmodern writers pose questions but rarely, if ever, offer answers to those questions. Like your refrain, Dr. Braithwaite. 'How do we seize the past?' You don't completely say we can't. After all, you offer an extraordinary amount of information about Flaubert. Yet you acknowledge that there is so much more we can't seize. What do you say at one point? 'We can study files for decades, but every so often we are tempted to throw up our hands and declare that history is merely another literary genre: the past is autobiographical fiction pretending to be a parliamentary report' (90)."

"Which also raises another point that should be made. While we acknowledge that our tendency toward highlighting textuality might help to reinforce the message that the past can be known to us only through its textual traces, it is by no means the sole conveyor of that message," Claudia stated. "Blatant statements like that of Dr. Braithwaite deliver the message with much greater significance."

"You have a few of them yourself," Dr. Braithwaite nodded archly at her, and I was briefly worried that he might actually be flirting, especially when he quoted, "'And when you and I talk about history we don't mean what actually happened, do we? The cosmic chaos of everywhere, all time? We mean the tidying up of this into books, the concentration of the benign historical eye upon years and places and persons. History unravels; circumstances, following their nature inclinations, prefer to remain raveled' (6). It doesn't get much clearer than that."

"That's true," I stepped in before they could launch into anything further. "Of course, those blatant statements are themselves metafictional because you are, in a way, stepping out of a narrative to express the idea that we can't know history. Amy Elias notes that in your novels, history "… becomes more about testifying to the unpresentable than re-presenting the past" (29). In other words, you talk a lot about what you can't have."

"The plot devices backup the message as well," Philip put in. "History thinks it knows that Chatterton committed suicide. But what if Ackroyd's alternative version is correct? It sounds plausible. How can we ever prove either story?"
"Then there is the fact of the parrots," Dr. Braithwaite added. "We will never know which is the true parrot that sat on Flaubert's desk, and therefore we must acknowledge there are events, circumstances, a myriad of things we will never be able to learn, but '… perhaps that's as it should be' (189)."

The check had come at this point, and while they politely argued amongst themselves about who should pay it, I quietly slipped the waiter my Visa card.

It had been a successful lunch, I thought, and I couldn't wait to tell Neo all about it. The cheese, by the way, was excellent.
Chapter 8
HISTORICAL FACT V. FICTIONAL FANCY

It was definitely a sense of frisson I felt when I discovered the article by Julian Barnes entitled, "When Flaubert Took Wing." I'd already read Flaubert's Parrot several times at that point, and I took it on faith that Barnes wasn't making up things about Flaubert. It was actually fun to learn about the author from such an unconventional format. I wasn't as sure about the parrots, though. Were they just a plot device? The existence Dr. Braithwaite, struggling to understand his wife's suicide; the meeting with Ed Winterton and the saga of the Juliet Herbert letters -- those were obviously fictional. There was no reason to think the duplicitous parrots weren't also just fancies of Barnes, added to create the frame for the unorthodox biography. But I think I really must have wanted them to be real.

That's the only way I can explain how excited I was when I read Barnes' article explaining the origins of the book. He tells how, in 1981, he vacationed in France and visited the statue in Rouen, the Hotel Dieu and Croisset -- and discovered the parrots! He even quotes from his travel notebooks about the experience of finding the second parrot:

Then, crouched on top of one of the display cabinets, what did we see but Another Parrot. Also bright green, also, according to the gardienne & also a label hung on its perch, the authentic parrot borrowed by GF when he wrote UCS!! I ask the gardienne if I can take it down & photograph it. She concurs, even suggests I take off the glass case. I do, & it strikes me as slightly less authentic than the other one: mainly because it seems benign, & F wrote of how irritating the other one was to have on his desk. As I am looking for somewhere to photograph it, the sun comes out -- this on a cloudy, grouchy, rainy morning & slants across a display cabinet. I put it there & take 2 sunlit photos; then, as I pick the parrot up to replace it, the sun goes in. It felt like a benign intervention by GF -- signaling thanks for my presence, or indicating that this was indeed the true parrot. ("When Flaubert Took Wing")

Here, then, was not only the discovery of the parrots' actual existence, but the author's own record of it at the time.
I immediately picked up the phone to share my revelation with Neo, who had just finished reading *Flaubert's Parrot* after hearing so much about it from me. "So they're real. There really were two different parrots," I gushed after reading most of the article to him.

His response was less than impressive. "So?"

"Well," I said. "Doesn't it add something? Don't you find it cool that you could go see the parrots yourself?"

"Is this Flaubert a real person then?"

I think my mouth hung open for a moment. "You mean you've never heard of Gustave Flaubert? *Madame Bovary*?"

"No." After a few minutes he seemed to find it necessary to say something since I'd obviously been struck speechless. "But I enjoyed the book anyway. Why does he have to be real?"

What was it Dr. Braithwaite had said upon the discovery of the second parrot? "I wondered if it mattered to anyone except me, who had lavishly invested significance in the first parrot. The writer's voice -- what makes you think it can be located that easily?" (21-22). Did it matter only to me, the existence of historical "facts" within this work of "fiction"? Was I being rebuked for my naiveté in clinging to the idea that facts could be located still in a postmodern world?

I should, of course, have known better. Linda Hutcheon says of historiographic metafiction that it often plays with facts, deliberately falsifying details to show that errors can and do happen in the historical record. Historiographic metafiction, according to her, "does not 'aspired to tell the truth' as much as to question whose truth gets told" (123). The authors themselves certainly aren't hiding their opinions on the matter. Barnes writes in *Flaubert's Parrot*: "What happened to the truth is not recorded" (65). Lively, in *Moon Tiger*, agrees: "Of truth, whatever that might be" (6). Then there's Jeanette Winterson's questionable refrain in *The Passion*: "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (160). In other words, I shouldn't exactly trust Barnes to tell me about Flaubert. The classic reader in me feels cheated by that. Who will tell me the truth if not books? It wonders. The postmodern reader in me is wiser to the ways of the world. Who says there's truth to be found anywhere? It counts.
An interviewer once asked Peter Ackroyd, "Do you sometimes use historical facts that are not true?" His answer? "Oh, yes, all the time" (Onega 213). He goes on to explain,

I think it is possibly because I have such a loose hold on the truth. I mean, continuously we are inventing ourselves as a person, so that I don't find any real sacrosanct quality about so-called facts and so-called truths. I mean, that's probably rather wicked of me or impious of me to do that. But as far as I am concerned, everything is available for recreation or manipulation. (214)

In other words, the world is a slippery place, and being an author, he relishes being able to take full advantage of the uncertainty to let his imagination work its magic. After all, he writes in Chatterton, "If there were no truths, everything was true" (127). As both Charles and Philip learn, what a glorious opportunity that can be. Of course, in the interview, he adds, "in Chatterton, there are all sorts of things that were completely made up" (214). I haven't yet felt like tracking down what those might be.
Chapter 9

THE HISTORIAN’S VERSION

In 1983, few historians took notice of a French professor who was lecturing at U.C. Berkeley on the topic of "Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia." Twenty years later, it would be largely impossible to read a paper which did not include at least a superfluous reference to his theories, for Michel Foucault would shake the foundations of many of our cherished disciplines, history included. His Berkeley lectures, like many of his books, dealt with knowledge, power and truth, not uncommon subjects for a philosopher to contemplate. But it is Foucault's unconventional approach to these topics that sets him apart and makes him so influential -- and troubling. To examine power, Foucault suggests, do not analyze the powerful; instead, study the powerless -- the prisoners, the mentally ill, and sexual deviants -- and ask why and how society has taken away their power at certain times. In Foucault's own words from the conclusion of his lecture: "What I tried to do from the beginning was to analyze the process of 'problematization' -- which means: how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) became a problem." During the lectures, Foucault confronted his audience with the problematization of truth, inquiring not how we determine truth from falsehood, but instead asking: Who specifies what is truth? Who gets to tell the truth? What are the consequences of truth-telling? The implication throughout is that truth is a concept relative to a certain historical point, controlled by those with knowledge and power. The implication for our profession is that historians had been getting it all wrong by first assuming an absolute concept of truth and second by not asking questions from the proper angle, that of how and why things become problematized from the outside in. It's the analysis of this inverted problem that will lead to the answers we seek. In other words, we needed to find new ways of looking at history.

Foucault was not alone. In 1979, Lyotard had published The Postmodern Condition for the Canadian government, in which he condemned all metanarratives, essentially any theories that propose a single explanation for an event or situation, such as the Enlightenment belief in rational and scientific progress, the Marxist belief in the proletariat revolution over capitalism, the Freudian belief that we are controlled by libidinal desires, and even the totalizing of history into certain distinct periods. Even earlier, in 1973, historian Hayden White had proposed that there really was not much difference between the
writing of history and the writing of literature, further shaking up the profession by suggesting that history might not be as close to the ultimate truth we would like to believe it is. Like it or not, postmodernism had entered the history profession. By 1999, Keith Jenkins was talking about how we need to get rid of useless modern relics, such as history. Why, Jenkins asks, given our postmodern state in which history appears to be only a fiction since we cannot ever really know what happened, should we bother writing about history at all? Let’s give up and move on, he suggests. Needless to say, this is not a popular suggestion in the history profession, and most historians have been able so far to ignore Jenkins, who is, after all, an extreme example of a fairly extreme movement, postmodernism.

However, neither Jenkins nor postmodernism can be dismissed completely out of hand because, as Appleby, Hunt, Jacob and many others have pointed out, postmodernism has cast a light on issues that have been entangled with the discipline since it began, namely the attainability of truth and the possibility of objectivity. Historians have, of course, always sought to tell the truth about the past; that is what separates historical narrative from fictional narrative. During the nineteenth century, with the advance of science, historians sought a way validate their work – to secure its truth and objectivity – and found it in the use of scientific methods. History became a study of the progress of human development, and historians followed the lead of those like Comte who insisted they begin with “documents and the facts they revealed and then develop their generalizations on a scientific model. Careful collection of documents, patient study and comparison and the gradual accumulation of information would itself reveal the laws that determined historical development” (Appleby et al 68). Ranke, who many refer to as the founder of modern historiographical method, further emphasized the need for thorough research of primary sources, and he admonished historians against transforming history into a moral lesson. Ranke advocated for the use of the third person, omniscient voice when writing historical accounts. This voice, which abolishes the word “I,” serves to make history seem more objective by eliminating the historian’s own personal opinions from the report. History thus attempted to become a science, with the goal of discovering and telling the truth about the past in a methodological, rational, objective manner.

Doubts about the achievability of that goal slipped in during the twentieth century, though, especially during and after the World Wars when many people began to question the claims from science
that it was helping to advance civilization, and that allowed for other inquiries about science; for instance, could it really find the truth? And if science was being questioned, history was also open for debate because, as we have just seen, the discipline of history had been using science to legitimize itself. In the 1920s and 1930s, two historians – Charles Beard and Carl Becker – began to openly doubt whether historians could establish the truth since the facts were always open to interpretation by the historian, who could – and did – choose and discard from among the various pieces of evidence, often guided by individual ideologies and cultural perspectives. They were helped in their cause by emerging examples of historians who had been drafted by various governments during the wars and ordered to write histories in ways that would favor that government. Beard and Becker had introduced relativism, the idea that historians could not be objective because they always held a subjective position. Despite our attempts to muffle our personal ideologies, what we see, think – and, most importantly, write about – depends on who we are and where we are: our culture, nationality, gender, age, education, social and economic status, political and religious beliefs.

On top of this unwanted entry of doubt into the attainability of objectivity, after World War II, a new group of untraditional students (in other words, those who were not white males) began entering the university history departments, and they served to further reinforce the presence of relativism in the system by questioning why their histories had largely remained untold. Where were women in the traditional histories? Minorities? Other cultures? History, they claimed, was written by dead white men about dead white men. To its credit, the discipline responded, opening up whole new areas of research and creating the subdisciplines of social and cultural history, and women’s and postcolonial studies. We more or less became aware of our biases and of the incertitude of our sources and how we choose to use them. As Arthur Marwick points out, we now tend to view history as an accumulation of knowledge, with each historian contributing a piece which is then judged by our peers as worthy of inclusion. (This mindset is strikingly similar to the consensus model entertained by the early philosophes and historians from the eighteenth century, before the Rankean revolution.) Knowledge is seen as flexible, subject to modifications and reinterpretations as new evidence is found or new intriguing theories are proposed -- and as society’s perceptions change -- but by and large it aims to be as accurate and objective as possible. Within this
framework, most historians happily go about their business. But certain postmodern theorists are not content to let it rest at that.

Like Foucault, what Jenkins and his fellow postmodernists call into question is the notion of truth. The query for them is “Can we know and tell the truth about history?” and their response seems to be “No.” As we have seen, this is not a new question, nor is the response unprecedented, but postmodernism has taken it a step further, because if Jenkins is right, if we cannot tell the truth, the question becomes: What are we telling when we talk about history? Can we even legitimately talk about history? And if we can’t, why should we bother? It is questions like these that cause traditional historians like Marwick to develop raging cases of “pomophobia,” as Beverley Southgate calls it, and there have been several notable battles between the traditionalists and the postmodernists in the pages of history journals, including Marwick versus Hayden White and Perez Zagorin versus Jenkins, with enough mud flinging on both sides to send one to the showers after reading them just to rinse off the collateral splatters. What becomes most clear, at least to me, is that neither side desires to truly understand the other, that the postmodern side seems intent on making it difficult to comprehend what they are talking about, and that the traditionalists try to make the evils of postmodernism seem worse than that might really be. So mudslinging and inscrutable, self-serving explanations aside, let us backup and address a very important question we have yet to answer: Just what is postmodernism? The answer, it turns out, is not an easy one.

For starters, postmodernism is not one unified theory; it is many theories defined differently by just about everyone attempting to use the term. In fact, most of the French intellectuals usually quoted in arguments for (or against) postmodernism refused to be classified as postmodernists. Different disciplines also seem to have their own versions. For architecture, postmodernism is a style that repudiates modernism (in which case the term actually makes sense); for literature, it might be more of a playful way of doing experimental writing and then critiquing that writing. But there are certain elements that most postmodern theories seem to share – and that are most relevant to us as historians in this debate. One of the most prevalent ideas usually cited is a distrust of metanarratives or grand theories that try to explain everything about the human condition and why we got to where we are, especially if told as a progression toward
liberation of some sort. (Yes, postmodernism itself has been accused of being just such a creature. But then postmodernism seems to relish such paradoxes.)

History is implicated here, of course, because it has often tended to tell such metanarratives. Comte, the proponent of the scientific method, saw history as the story of human progression from the dark ages of ignorance to the light of reason. I’ve used the term “story” here for a reason, because postmodernists believe that that is all these narratives are—simply stories, artificial meanings we’ve imposed upon certain events, often to obscure or justify Western hegemony, what Jenkins, in typical pomo-speak, calls “Western phallo-logocentrism” (195). Further attempting to debunk the “history as progression” myth, Foucault states that time itself does not progress in a linear manner; rather it is discontinuous, often conceived of differently by different cultures at different periods. Stripped of legitimacy, postmodernists assert, such metanarratives of history have become myths, making history itself a myth for some extremists. Of course, most, if not all, historians today deny any ability to conceive a single, overarching explanation of human existence, though they certainly do not go so far as to claim history is a myth. Marwick, a staunch defender of traditionalism, admits there are no universal laws of history. For him, as we have seen, history is a body of knowledge to which historians make small contributions--some even smaller than others, since a few historians with postmodern leanings have started to contribute only micronarratives, histories that focus tightly on a single issue and don’t attempt to risk anything by making any broader excursions.

If postmodernism were nothing more than this worrying about metanarratives, it would probably be disconcerting, but not necessarily dangerous to the profession. However, postmodernism took what many call “the linguistic turn,” and this turn complicates the situation by causing some historians to scratch their heads and others to want to scratch their colleagues’ eyes out. The origins of the linguistic turn date back to the early twentieth century and the teachings of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work forms the basis for structural linguistics. Basically, Saussure claimed that language was a system of signifiers (words) and signifieds (things). Meaning depends not on the union of signifiers to signifieds, but rather to the relationships of signifiers with other signifiers. For example, we define words by using other words. Claude Levi-Strauss expanded upon Saussure’s theories, and during the 1960s, both were utilized by Roland
Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and others to formulate structuralism, a short-lived theory claiming that all human activity is structured and can be seen as being coded like language. After structuralism was challenged as being ahistorical and not taking into account any individual agency, poststructuralism took its place.

Signifiers still take a central place in poststructural theory. If words derive their meanings only from other words and not from the things they supposedly represent, then there is no fixed meaning; there are only words, what poststructuralism likes to call “discourse” or sometimes “text.” Derrida’s deconstruction theory comes into play here, because it is based on this belief that words are all we have, but we can never know for sure the meanings of those words because they are not fixed to anything. For Derrida the only thing that exists is différence – “the ‘trace’ of a permanent absence” (Thompson 13). In deconstruction, what often matters more than what is there is what is not there, hence when doing a deconstructivist reading, one tries to find the meanings the author did not intentionally place into the text. If this sounds suspiciously like postmodernism, it is. The two theories have practically merged into one.

Foucault is also implicated in the linguistic turn. For Foucault as well, language is the only thing we can know, but as we saw earlier, it is not so much about what is being said as it is the rules that govern what can and cannot be said, and invariably those rules involve power relations, what Foucault labels “regimes of truth.” As Appleby, Hunt and Jacob put it, for Foucault, “truth is nothing more than the will to power within discourse” (213). Our concept of self – and of truth – is thus produced through discourse and the institutions that weld the power over us by controlling the meanings of that discourse. The implication for historians is that any human action cannot be identified as an individual behavior because we are all “the playthings of deeper cultural imperatives” (Marwick 16). Postmodernism has also adopted the similar ideas of Italian cultural theorist Antonio Gramsci, who proposed that the ruling class, for him the bourgeoisie, controlled the working classes not through coercion but by making them believe that they shared the same values with the bourgeoisie – and thus identified with them or aspired to be like them, rather than thinking about overthrowing them as a hegemonic power. For Gramsci, words could be used for this purpose because their meanings, not being fixed to their referents, could be appropriated for use in new ways.
So what does all this mean for historians? For traditionalists, postmodernism is an insane -- and frightening -- prospect that threatens to take away not only our ability to attain truth, but also all meaning from our work -- and perhaps from the whole world. Zagorin states:

Postmodernism thus denies both the ability of language or discourse to refer to an independent world of facts and things and the determinacy or decidability of textual meaning. By the same token, it also dismisses the possibility of objective knowledge and truth as goals of inquiry. (7)

Zagorin and Marwick are both quick to point out that the postmodernists have misrepresented Saussure’s thesis in that he never claimed there were only words and not an external reality of signifieds. Marwick goes on to assert that Saussure’s form of linguistics is not accepted as valid by all linguists. As for Derrida’s deconstruction, Marwick admits that “Derrida at least had a charming playfulness about him” (17), but that deconstruction is of no possible use for historians because you cannot simply look to a primary source for what the author was intentionally trying to hide.

Interestingly, Jenkins agrees with Zagorin and Marwick on the existence of reality and argues quite extensively on the fact that no one ever said there was no such thing as a “world out there.” It is understandable, though, that many tend to misunderstand this point because after asserting that there is reality, Jenkins goes on to condemn it as meaningless. In his words: “… our words refer, insofar as they generate meaning they can only ever refer indirectly -- via innumerable mediations -- to an actuality that always remains unavailable in its sublimity, its otherness, its radical alterity, its excess” (187). For Jenkins, postmodernism is not antirealist, but antirepresentationalist. The world can only become real through language, but language cannot possibly give an accurate representation of reality because it can only represent language -- since signifiers can only be defined by other signifiers. As we know, though, because we are able to communicate with each other to a certain extent, language has not collapsed into complete chaos. Meanings are relatively stabilized by what Jenkins, via Derrida, calls “power relations” and explains as:

These relative stabilizations (by virtue of the operation of “binary oppositions,” and so forth) make [Derrida’s] deconstruction of such “verticals of authority” necessary in the
name of emancipation and democracies “to come,” for they legitimate the hierarchical power relationships which infuse them with life. (191)

This brings us back to Foucault and Gramsci, through whom I understand this to mean that whoever controls the language holds the power. If there were no instability in language, the oppressed would not be able to manipulate the discourse, change the meanings and therefore overthrow the oppressor and change the world. Jenkins believes we should thus embrace the instability because, through it, “… a little bit of newness may be entering our world” (200). Of course, traditionally it is the oppressor who holds the power and controls the language.

At this point, you may well be thinking, “huh?” which I think is a valid thought. What, really, does this have to do with what we, as historians, do? As Marwick takes great pains to point out, “historians were aware of the ambiguities of language long before structuralism was ever heard of” (6). Words can mean different things to different people. We know that words change meaning over time, but since we are diligent, we attempt to track down what those meanings once were before we attempt to extrapolate from them. We attempt to carefully define the terms we use to avoid as much misunderstanding as possible. Somehow we seem to be able to communicate intelligently with each other. Through this instable, "meaningless" thing called language we have been able to amass an astonishingly large volume of knowledge about our past. This whole linguistic turn seems like more of an intellectual game than anything. But just like Jenkins’ call to abolish history, we cannot dismiss the whole linguistic turn quite yet because it does bring up another issue, and that is the narrative debate -- namely, is history nonfiction or fiction?

In the debate on the pages of the Journal of Contemporary History between Marwick and White, White seeks, as he puts it, to “… question the authority of ‘the past’ as a font of social wisdom and moral propriety” (234). Once you wade through his attacks on Marwick’s misunderstandings, fears and prejudices, what becomes apparent is that White is basing his argument not so much on the linguistic turn with its indeterminacy of meaning, but on the constraints placed upon us as writers by the conventions of language. White distinguishes between events and facts: events are what happened and cannot be altered, while facts are what are constructed by historians when they tell about those events. Thus, because they are
socially constructed, facts are unstable -- they can be revised, reinterpreted or rejected as consensus among historians shifts. Again, this is not anything new. White’s primary argument, though, lies in how historians write about the facts, what he calls emplotment, which is closer to fiction writing than many historians are comfortable admitting. In his first text, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, White declared that all historical narratives follow one of four emplotments: romance, tragedy, comedy or satire. Within these, he further defined four tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. White has since moved away from talking about the tropes, but he still maintains the strong connection between the writer and what is written, claiming, “what counts as an event, as a fact, and as an adequate representation or explanation of a historical phenomenon must be adjudged to be ‘relative’ to the time, place, cultural conditions of its formulation” (244). White calls the writing of history “craft-like” (243), and Thompson points out that White is attempting to define “history-as-art” rather than “history-as-science” (61). What concerns historians is this implicit implication that there is a large blurring between historical writing and literature.

Common sense alone tells us there is a difference between the two. Zagorin stresses that “… few readers or persons with any genuine experience of doing history will ever be persuaded that there is no fundamental difference between historical and fictional narratives because both are creations of language” (18). Zagorin is not alone in voicing his strong disagreement that historical write-ups are in any way associated with literature. Appleby and her colleagues are quick to point out that history is crucially distinguished from fiction by curiosity about what actually happened in the past (259). Marwick adds that, in his argument that history is fiction, White has failed to take into account the fact that historians do research, and that they are bound to the findings of that research. More than anything, it is the sources that control what is written, not a literary convention. The history writer does make decisions, of course. It is impossible to avoid choosing a beginning, middle and ending, as it is also unlikely that we can ever know the whole story or possibly tell it all. Thompson additionally concedes, as do most historians, that because we are human beings and cannot detach ourselves from our accounts, “… a complete, final and definitive account or interpretation of any historical matter is therefore an intrinsic impossibility” (72). But that does not mean that historical accounts are therefore fictional as White seems to be implying.
Postmodern theory, for the most part then, seems to be too extreme to be of any real threat -- or use -- to the profession. Some postmodernists point to the changes that have occurred in the profession as positive accomplishments of postmodern ideas, namely the birth of social history and the new works generated about those traditionally marginalized from history. They are also quick to point to the growing awareness of historians of their own subjective positions within the histories they tell. The counter-argument can be made, though, that these progressions would have occurred without postmodernism, and indeed they began in the early part of the twentieth century before postmodern ideas began to widely circulate. Thompson rightly concludes that postmodernism “… rests upon a theoretical basis which is irredeemably flawed. Its foundation is a presumption which is not merely counter-intuitive but preposterous, namely that language is constitutive of reality, not the other way around” (127). It appears, then, that Jenkins’ threat to abandon history is a fairly hollow one (and it is perhaps a good thing that he has decided to “move on”). Pure objectivity may be an unrealistic dream, but that does not negate the benefits of its pursuit. We might as well choose not to live just because we know that someday we will die.

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Chapter 10
THE POSTMODERN DICTIONARY

Para-
A very useful prefix in postmodernism, which the OED defines as “analogous or parallel to, but separate from or going beyond, what is denoted by the root word.” In other words, similar but different. Actually, that might make a good definition of postmodernism itself; perhaps it should have been called paramodernism. Common postmodern usage includes: paraliterary, paratactic, paralogy, parabasis, paracriticism.

Paradox
Something so self-contradictory it shouldn't be possible, yet is. Like a dog rolling in rotten fish, postmodernism positively revels in a good paradox.

Parody
The practice of imitating a genre or style, often done for a comic effect. Within postmodernism, though, it is used with more irony than mockery and its intent is to critique worn out forms and create something new, or as Linda Hutcheon says, it is "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26).

Past
Something we know happened before the present, but have trouble proving for sure since all we have left is textual evidence. Like Braithwaite's greased piglet, it squirms and makes people look foolish as they try to catch it, yet they can't seem to keep themselves from attempting to grab hold.

Perspectivism
An idea attributed to Nietzsche, means there is no single way to view the world because each person has his/her own perspective; ultimately there can be no one Truth, only multiple truths. See pluralism. In a postmodern world, perspectivism leads straight to irony since, given a lack of any central paradigm, we have nowhere else to turn.
Playful

Postmodern works can have serious overtones, but they are also often fun, sort of like an amusement park ride for the mind.

Pluralism

Lyotard said death to grand, totalizing narratives, and thus was born multiplicity, heteroglossia, diversity, and the lack of a single definition for anything. See perspectivism.

Pop

As in culture, not soda.

Pomophobia

A fear of postmodernism.

Poststructuralism

As postmodernism is a "post" of modernism, poststructuralism is a "post" of structuralism, a short-lived movement that tried to find the underlying, inherent structure behind a concept or narrative. Poststructuralism says signifiers and signifieds cannot be separated, but neither can they be united. See paradox. A kissing cousin of postmodernism, has now mostly lost its own identity.

Power

The specific concern in postmodernism is usually with who has it -- specifically institutions -- and who hasn't got it but would like it -- specifically the oppressed -- and how and why and what can be done about it. Ultimately proved elusive to Foucault, who referred to it as this "enigmatic thing which we call power, which is at once visible and invisible, present and hidden, ubiquitous" (qtd. in Hassan "Pluralism" 511).

Preconceptions

A favorite target of postmodernism. Be prepared to question everything you thought you knew, or rather were too lazy to even think about.

Problematize

To point out the inherent problems within any structure, usually without offering any solutions.
Provisionality

Temporary, tentative, conditional. In postmodernism, nothing is permanent.

Puzzlement

The state in which the average brain has been tangled into a pretzel while attempting to render decipherable postmodern theory.
Chapter 11

PERSONAL STORY

In the end, these books aren't about historical events or people, or even about how we think about history. They are about the here-and-now -- and people trying to make sense of that here-and-now. Claudia, lying in that hospital room, isn't really writing a history of the world. She's trying to piece together some meaning from her own life: her lost love, her brother, her child, her experiences during the war and as an unconventional historian and woman. Chatterton becomes Philip's story, a story of personal growth and empowerment in the face of the Chatterton papers and his best friend's death. "Three stories contend within me," Dr. Braithwaite tells us. "One about Flaubert, one about Ellen, one about myself. My own is the simplest of the three -- it hardly amounts to more than a convincing proof of my existence -- yet I find it the hardest to begin" (85-86). The major problem here, of course, is that his life does amount to more than just "convincing proof of my existence." As we well know, Dr. Braithwaite will later confess that his story includes trying to come to terms with a wife who was unfaithful and killed herself.

As for my story, well, it can hardly compare with those. I'm not dying. I didn't lose the love of my life in a war. I have found a somewhat mysterious box of books, but my aunt isn't exactly a famous writer. My spouse didn't commit suicide. I have no spouse. No love to have lost. I'm just an aspiring writer who can't think of anything to say. Just another "singleton" who probably reads too much and doesn't get out often enough. You see, my story isn't very interesting.

Someday, though, I will be a part of history -- if history lasts long enough. It sounds arrogant, but it's not. We're all a part of history: you, me, Dr. Braithwaite, Claudia, Thomas Chatterton, Gustave Flaubert, Julian Barnes, Penelope Lively, Napoleon. There's a quote in my aunt's notebooks by J.M. Coetzee that says, "What is miraculous about the past is that we have succeeded -- God knows how -- in making thousands and millions of individual fictions created by individual human beings, lock well enough into one another to give us what looks like a common past, a shared story" (38). History is nothing but an accumulation of personal stories, selected and edited, perhaps even forged, and made public. We forget, in the rush to study the famous, that everyone has a history, that we are all play a part some way or another. Postmodernism reminds us of this, that histories can be both big and small -- the millions who died during
World War II and also Tom Southern who died during World War II after falling in love with Claudia Hampton. As Tom writes, "When the times are out of joint it is brought uncomfortably home to you that history is true and that unfortunately you are part of it" (103). Our own histories, small though they may be, are always relevant to us, aren't they?

But why the obsession with other people's history? Why does Claudia wish to write a history of the world? Why is Dr. Braithwaite telling us all this stuff about Flaubert? There's a well-worn saying that if we don't learn from the past, we are destined to repeat it, so somehow we must think if only we can analyze the past, we will surely find clues to our present. Why did Ellen Braithwaite kill herself? There must be a telltale sign somewhere, anywhere, that will tell us. Dr. Braithwaite doesn't find anything, though, does he? He realizes that history is like books: "Books make sense of life. The only problem is that the lives they make sense of are other people's lives, never your own" (168). A.S. Byatt thinks we are drawn to history because it is fragmented and mysterious, much like ourselves: "We are perhaps no more than a series of disjunct sense-impressions, remembered incidents, shifting bits of knowledge, opinion, ideology and stock responses. We like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to the imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive" (31). Claudia, on the other hand, does find something meaningful when she peers back at history: "I need it; I need you, Gordon, Jasper, Lisa, all of them. And I can only explain this need by extravagance: my history and the world's. Because unless I am a part of everything I am nothing" (207).

I'm sorry. My words are bouncing around like unruly puppies, aren't they? I fear I'm not making much sense, not to you and much less to myself. My personal here-and-now has intruded, and I can't seem to settle into accepted academic, analytical prose. Quite honestly, my brain is off romping with those puppies somewhere, and I can't seem to get it to come back on leash.

Yesterday Neo asked whether or not I had a camera on my computer set up for video messaging. I'll be honest: I prefer to hide behind a printed message rather than risk face-to-face interaction. Our first phone conversation had been alarming enough. And so I told Neo, like I tell everyone, that it's been broken and I just can't seem to get it to work. It was only after I heard my words that I realized this was not a wise
thing to have said to a computer techie, and especially not to one who has remote access to my computer to fix things. He quickly found the problem, which I already knew.

"Just change that setting to 'on,'" he was saying, as I held the phone and stared with growing panic at the screen.

In the last few months, Neo and I have undeniably grown closer. We talk nearly every single day. I've told him so much about the box and all my discoveries that he probably knows the content just as well as I do. But I had no idea what Neo looked like, nor he me. I was in California. He was in Australia. He might take one look at me, mumble some awkward excuse, and I'd never hear from him again. No, I'm not that bad. My hair is pulled up in a ponytail, as usual I have no makeup on, my sweatshirt isn't the most attractive item in my wardrobe, and I'm no longer in my 20s (or 30s), but I still do yoga every day. I have no horrible physical deformities. Take a deep breath, you're being silly, I tell myself.

Then a second fear surfaces: What if he's horrible? Fat and unshaven in some nasty old faded black tee-shirt?

"Come on, I'll turn mine on if you turn yours on." As usual, I know Neo has read my thoughts. His voice is teasing, challenging -- and also reassuring. This is Neo.

So I click the switch that says "on" and there he is. The first thing I see, because I'm afraid to look up, is his hand resting on a mouse, a pale hand with a scatter of brown hairs. It looks unthreatening so I brave a higher look: white tee-shirt, stubble-free chin, kind eyes. "Hello," the face is saying with that familiar accent, and it's still smiling after having taken in my sudden appearance as well.

"Hi."

My story might start to get interesting, after all.
Chapter 12

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Biography

Enid Starkie isn't the only Flaubert biographer. Frederick Brown, Benjamin Bart, Herbert Lottman, Geoffrey Wall, Henri Troyat, Maurice Nadeau, Eric Le Calvez, Francis Steegmuller, Hermia Oliver, Philip Spencer, David Roe, Lewis Piaget Shanks, Meryl Tyers, and even Jean-Paul Sartre have all written biographies of the novelist who published only nine books. Do you think Julian Barnes should be added to this list? Why? Why not?

Julian Barnes has published 17 books so far, not counting the detective stories he published under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh. How many biographies do you think will be written about him? Consider this in your discussion: "What chance would the craftiest biographer stand against the subject who saw him coming and decided to amuse himself?" (Flaubert's Parrot 38).

Vocabulary

After graduating from Oxford with honors in Modern Languages, Julian Barnes spent three years as a lexicographer for the Oxford English Dictionary supplement where he "was in charge of the 'rude words and sports words'" (Guignery 2), which greatly helps to explain where he picked up some of the words used in Flaubert's Parrot. How many of them did you have to look up in the OED? You do use the OED, don't you?

Academic Readers

In a conversation with Julian Barnes, Vanessa Guignery accused him of creating the three differing chronologies in Flaubert's Parrot in order to confuse the reader. Barnes disagreed, saying "I think I only confuse the academic reader. … I would say that it is actually illuminating" (Barnes "In Conversation" 261). Whose opinion matters most: the author, the academic reader or the average reader?

Consider this: There was once a graduate student who was asked to discuss the significance of the "Examination Paper" chapter in Flaubert's Parrot. After an over-long deliberation, she decided that the
chapter is a prime example of historiographic metafiction -- it poses thought-provoking questions while evading answers. One of the concluding chapters, it thus further advances the text's theme that our attempt to grasp history, meaning and truth is nothing more than a sublime and unrequited desire. According to Barnes, the chapter is just intended as "a nice joke" because "it's not an examination paper on the book you've just read" (266). Whose interpretation is more valid?

Buzz

Julian Barnes makes a cameo appearance in Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary, where, at a literary party, Bridget sees "a faint smile hover over the thin-but-attractive lips of Julian Barnes" (86) as she makes the usual fool of herself. In the movie version, however, Salman Rushdie replaces Barnes, taking away Barnes' chance at Hollywood fame. Why was Barnes slighted? There was that whole fatwa thing, of course, that made Rushdie a news item, but consider this: among the praise printed at the beginning of the movie tie-in release of Bridget Jones is a rather positive comment from Rushdie. There is none from Barnes. Discuss.
Chapter 13

AND THE BOX

The box is packed, missing only the CD that Neo will send back. It has been an interesting exploration, though at times I feel like I've experienced the collision my aunt described between fiction, history and postmodernism from the front seat of the car -- I'm not sure which vehicle I've been riding in, but I do know the airbags deployed. She was very correct in her assessment that the wreckage would be complicated. I can sympathize with the blog poster who once wrote about postmodernism: "The trouble is, I believe that I understand what they're saying, but I don't think I know what it means." That might also perhaps be the best summary of postmodernism I've run across yet.

At least the box is no longer staring at me. I've discovered its secrets. Well, all but one. Neo broke the news yesterday that they've been unable to decipher the CD. Whether or not it contains a thesis we'll never know. Neo was concerned about how I'd take the news, apologetic even. But I feel calm; I think I would have been surprised if they had found anything. If I've learned anything over the past few months, it's that there is much more of what we will never know than what we think we do know. And, I believe Dr. Braithwaite is correct: "perhaps that's as it should be" (189).

"You should write the thesis," Neo had suggested, "Like we find out how Philip is going to write the Chatterton story at the end of the book -- the same book we're reading."

But I shook my head. "It's just too clichéd. No insult to Peter Ackroyd, but it's been done to death since then."

"I suppose you're right."

"I'll find something to write about one of these days," I promised him.

And maybe I have found it. Or maybe something better.

I received another call from my father this morning. It seems my aunt had an additional surprise in store for me. This time it was money: my share from the sale of her house and other assets. A rather large amount of money. My father wanted to know if I had any ideas for how I would spend it. To my surprise -- and certainly his as well -- I did. "I'm taking a trip to England," I told him.
Now I was waiting for Neo to wake up so I could call him. We were on a 16-hour time difference; it was already tomorrow in Australia, something that I always found reassuring. Impatient, I tried to kill time by looking up distances. I was 5,456 miles away from London, while Neo was 10,562 miles, so he had almost twice as much to travel as I did, but I hoped that he would want to join me. What I had in mind was something akin to Julian Barnes' visit to France, recounted as Dr. Braithwaite's discovery of the competing parrots in Flaubert's Parrot. We would visit Barnes' childhood homes in Acton and Northwood. We'd tour Magdalen College, Oxford, and find the offices of the Oxford English Dictionary. Maybe we'd even locate his gravesite. I wonder if "Nothing to be frightened of" is engraved on his headstone? Then we could try to find Ackroyd's haunts in London, and Lively's homes in Swansea and North London.

Neo gave a sleepy laugh when I told him, but after a couple of minutes and more coffee, he started to sound just as excited. "We can take a side trip to Bristol to see the Church that Chatterton went to, maybe go see his portrait at the Tate Gallery. And then try some of Ackroyd's favorite pubs."

Can you tell that Chatterton was Neo's favorite? I listened to him continue to plan our itinerary while I silently thanked my aunt. I'd never know if she wrote her thesis on post-1980 British fiction, history and postmodernism, but perhaps that didn't matter anymore.

"Maybe we'll even find something like the two parrots – two IBM Selectric typewriters that each claim to have been to one he used to compose Flaubert's Parrot!"

Maybe we would.
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