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Narrative desire and historical reparations: Three contemporary British authors

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NARRATIVE DESIRE AND HISTORICAL REPARATIONS:
THREE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH AUTHORS

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for

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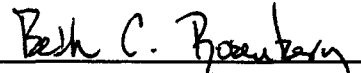
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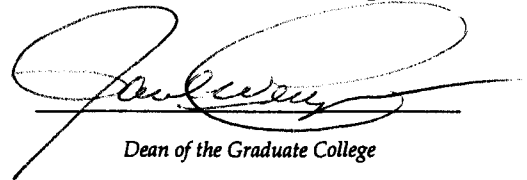
Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations: Three Contemporary
British Authors

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

**Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations:
Three Contemporary British Authors**

By

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British novelists since Walter Scott have exhibited an interest in history, but this discursive affinity has transformed itself into a veritable obsession in the fiction of the last two decades. Indeed, a concern *with* and distrust *of* history and historiographic projects is often hailed as a defining characteristic of postmodernism. And while writers of "new historical novels" cannot be said to form a movement as such, the predominance of such texts reveals the presence of communal concerns, and a readily identifiable strain of literary production that addresses the circulation of mutual symptoms, beliefs, and anxieties as a response to living in this particular moment in history. Adopting and adapting the theories of Hayden White and Peter Brooks, I highlight various types of "narrative desire" that drive both narrators and readers in their employment of history. Examining three representative novels – A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* –

this study explores the communal logic and impulse that identifies both reading and constructing narratives as purposeful gestures in coming to terms with our present and future. Each novel attempts to control the ambiguities of history and our ability truly to know it by allowing historical fact and fiction to merge, overlap, and create a new whole. These novels also reflect a number of cultural anxieties about the various narratives that have been constructed to explain the past: Byatt contests the postmodern dismissal of Victorian ideologies in the working through of narratives; McEwan requires a reassessment of the Enlightenment narrative in the face of the collective trauma of the twentieth century's violent history; and Rushdie re-narrates recent Indian history in order to find an issue out of the impasse of fundamentalist and monolithic conceptions of national identity. These novelists, in different ways, employ what has become known as postmodern artifice, sometimes as a way to reject the notion of historical construction, sometimes to advocate it, but always to bring us closer to what they believe are significant values and truths.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

British novelists since Walter Scott have exhibited an interest in history, but this affinity has transformed into a veritable obsession in the fiction of contemporary writers in the last two decades. In fact, a concern with (and distrust of) history and historiographic projects is often hailed as a defining characteristic of postmodernism. And while these writers of "new historical novels," as Del Ivan Janik labels them, cannot be said to form a movement as such, the propensity of such texts indicates the existence of one or more communal concerns. Nevertheless, there exists a readily identifiable strain of literary production that addresses the circulation of mutual symptoms, beliefs, and anxieties as a response to living in this particular moment in history.

Examining three representative novels – A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* – this study explores the communal logic and impulse that identifies both reading and constructing narratives as purposeful gestures in coming to terms with our present and future.

This preoccupation with the past can be attributed to a number of different

factors, not the least of which is our own ambivalent relationship with the present moment. Pronouncements of "the end of history" or of *posthistoire* by theorists such as Baudrillard, Jameson, and Fukuyama reflect a sense of desperation. This unknown, shapeless, and fragmented world clearly poses a challenge to a group of writers. The end of the century and, in this case, the millenium, is an obvious and natural time for a re-assessment, a recounting of accomplishments and failures. But *fin de siècle* and millennial misgivings (what exactly does the future hold, if history no longer exists?) produce, not surprisingly, a good number of works of "apocalyptic fiction."

Enlightenment concepts of a progressivist history have also shown themselves to be ill-founded, primarily by the violent and traumatic nature of the century through which we have just passed. Whatever dream we may have been fostering - that we were slowly evolving toward some utopian nirvana - was dashed on the rocks of the Nazi concentration camps, the Stalinist gulags, Hiroshima, and many other instances of cultural violence throughout the twentieth century. These events have been traumatic for the Western psyche and concepts of Western civilized self need to be entirely revised. As Zygmunt Bauman observes of these events, nothing "could be more bewildering, shocking and traumatic to the people trained, as we all have been, to see their past as the relentless and exhilarating progression of the ages of reason, enlightenment and emancipatory, liberating revolutions" (*Life* 193). As such, Bauman contends, we live not only in the "age of camps" but also in the "age of revaluation."

The stories we have been telling ourselves since the Enlightenment have not only proved sadly inadequate, but events have demonstrated that they could also lead us to totalitarianism, oppression, and possible annihilation. As such, the postmodern age is often characterized, in Lyotard's well-worn phrase, by its "incredulity towards metanarratives," those all-encompassing, totalizing, and teleological constructions that imbued our lives with transcendent meaning. The so-called "master narratives" of modernity - the humanist metanarratives of eventual human emancipation - "have been revealed as the fallible projections of local rather than global interests, of desires rather than 'knowledge'" (Bennet 262). The process of reevaluation thus includes a reassessment of the narratives that give our lives meaning, the abandonment of some and the invention of others that will provide some solid foundation to our lived existence.

The rapidity of change in the twentieth century also created the impression of living entirely unique circumstances that had no precedent in the past. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, for example, we are forced to contend with the acceleration of history. Largely due to the rapidity of technological advancements, modernity is often perceived as "forever accelerating, speeding us faster through rapid mutations, each moment more breathless, more extraordinary than the last" (Luckhurst and Marks 1-2). This aggravates our sense of living in a perpetual present, heightening our ever-present anxiety about the impossibility of grasping, to say nothing of living in, the contemporary. This acceleration of contemporary time leads to a strong sense of discontinuity

between the present and the past. The rapidity with which the world appears to be changing makes it increasingly difficult to maintain any sense of connection with history.

In the light of these events, traditional models of history, strongly associated with the rationalist Enlightenment project, prove themselves to be inadequate in describing the post-war world. The challenge has been to find a set of narratives that will allow us to undergo this process of reevaluation. Fiction writers perceive their craft as an alternate mode of expression since novels may offer a refracted view of history. Fiction also opens up a number of possibilities unavailable to the monological gaze of the historian. Through such techniques as shifts in narrative voice, play with chronological or linear presentation, the inclusion of different versions of the same event, or the absence of closure, novelists offer a means both to question and to examine the historical past.

This preoccupation with history is particularly prevalent in the British novel of the late twentieth century. Its most recognized writers such as Julian Barnes, A. S. Byatt, John Fowles, Salman Rushdie, Graham Swift, Barry Unsworth, and Jeanette Winterson have devoted considerable time to investigating Britain's relationship to its past. A number of determinants, particularly relevant to the British situation, have engendered this renewed focus on and adaptation of the classic historical novel.

Perhaps the strongest contributing factor has been a constant and sometimes growing sense of "declinism" in the country. Generally perceived as having

relinquished its position as a global and economic power, the country reconsiders regretfully its diminished place in the world. At the same time, the country's populace must assess the implications of these changes on a private rather than public level. If an individual's identity is strongly linked to the standing of his or her country in the world community, these changes are likely to cause personal transformation and reassessment. In other words, what exactly does it now mean to be British? As Jim Tomlinson repeatedly points out, the issue of Britain's purported decline is secondary to the general consensus that such a decline is actually taking place (3, 7). The communal sense of waning significance inevitably has an impact on every strata of British society.

Tomlinson argues that since the 1950s Britain has been living with the "culture of decline," and he sees the 1970s and 1980s as the period of maximum impact of the notions of declinism. This led to what he terms a "panic" in British society, giving rise to much contemplation and debate about the present and future role of Britain on the world stage.

Changes in the demographic makeup of the country and the growth of its multicultural population have also put in question the traditional notion of homogeneous Britishness. The fact that some of the most significant fiction to emerge recently from England is written by "postcolonial" novelists such as Rushdie, Timothy Mo, and Caryl Phillips reveals the extent to which British society is evolving into something fundamentally different from typical notions of Britishness. British identity has also been compromised and altered by its

evolving relationship with, and inclusion in, the larger European community. The development of the EEC and, on a smaller scale, the construction of the Channel Tunnel, have eroded the insularity and ethnocentricity that have historically been hallmarks of the British character.

This recent emphasis on the past cannot be attributed to any single factor but rather to an interplay of those previously mentioned. For example, Del Ivan Janik concedes that it "would be difficult to confidently assign historical or literary-historical causes for the striking resurgence and refashioning of historical fiction that these writers' works represent" (186). But the recent upsurge in "new historical fiction" certainly reflects a communal desire for some sort of historical stability in an unstable age. For while Britain is not the first empire in history to see its powers wane, it is the first to do so in a modern context. That no precedent exists for this situation is likely to induce further anxiety. After all, what guarantee is there that this is not the beginning of a process that will eventually see Britain disappear entirely? The death of Empire may signal the eventual death of Britain. As such, it is imperative for Britain to formulate narratives that explain her place in the historical continuum. While some of these narratives express nostalgia and a yearning for the stability of the past, a number strive to discover a way to maintain contact with the country's glorious past and propel it into the future. If this anxiety affects society at large it will be reflected in the art that emerges in this period. Thus, not surprisingly, recent fiction focuses on our relationship with the past, both public and private. As

representatives of a larger communal group, writers of fiction express, illuminate, and examine the various anxieties we experience in our relationship with the past. Narratives permit a temporary reliving of the past and a reviewing of the paths taken on the road to the present. And while we can investigate the past for its own sake, historical narratives, both fictional and documentary, are often dictated by the concerns and needs of the present.

Apart from relieving some of the anxieties elicited by this troublesome period of history, a number of other elements may compel a writer to reexamine the past. First, disappointment with the present often leads to nostalgia or a yearning for a past that was fuller, more stable, and less uncertain. Fictional narratives allow for the direct juxtaposition of past and present, to the detriment of one or the other, as in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Byatt's *Possession*. Second, anxiety is also produced by a feeling that we may have taken a wrong turn somewhere, or that there existed alternate paths that might have been chosen. A return to the past allows us to uncover potential alternatives that have suffered the erasure of time and to contemplate whether the right path was chosen. Here, voices that have been silenced by the dominant ideology, the victors, are given a chance to speak. Feminist novels such as Winterson's *The Passion* or postcolonial works such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* often fall into this category. Third, a sense of lack of control over one's life and the absence of a true sense of freedom can lead individuals to take an active role by constructing narratives that allow them to exercise some mastery over their lives. Novels like

Swift's *Waterland* or Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* the narrator/protagonist's anxieties often reflect those of the novelist.

Finally and paradoxically, a growing distrust of historical narratives leads to the re-examination of "history" itself. The recognition of history as a construct, not as a reality simply waiting to be transparently communicated in language, has led to a greater focus on the role of narrativization. The question is not whether an event occurred, but *what* it means and *how* we make it mean. Amy Elias sees postmodernism as

characterized by an obsession with history and a desperate desire for the comforting self-awareness that is supposed to come from historical knowledge. But because of its philosophical and social underpinnings, postmodern art also projects skepticism and irony about the possibilities for true historical knowledge and suspicion of any social or historical narrative that purports to make sense of a chaotic world. (xvii)

This interplay between desire for, and skepticism of, history will be a focal point in this examination of some British contemporary novels. The extent to which various texts exhibit these contradictory impulses suggests that despite what we know about the provisionality and contingent nature of any historiographic reconstruction, there still exists a modicum of faith in the power of narrative to communicate some truth about the past. For example, incredulity towards the grand narratives does not eliminate our desire to construct patterns and systems

of signification. In fact, one might stipulate that it is precisely the loss of these metanarratives that creates the greater need for what Lyotard calls *petits récits*. Since we no longer possess a system whereby meaning might be immediately conferred upon an event, the creation of the "little narratives" becomes our only source for such signification.

Tensions also arise in postmodern texts due to irresolvable paradoxes inherent in the writing process. Contemporary writers exhibit a simultaneous *desire for* and *suspicion of* emplotment, the construction of a unified and totalizing narrative. And these novelists often demonstrate at least a working knowledge of postmodern and poststructuralist theory, which then exercises a direct influence on the kind of fiction they produce. Writers like Amis, Peter Ackroyd and Rushdie import criticism and theory directly into their novels, while others, like Byatt and David Lodge, situate their fictions literally in academic settings. Mark Currie labels these works "theoretical fiction," for while they are self-reflexive, they also demonstrate the novelist's insight into the various ways their texts may be read and deconstructed. This theoretical knowledge ultimately leads to self-consciousness which, in turn, produces self-referentiality.

These novelists announce, in a number of ways, their awareness of the impossibility of truly capturing the past and of the provisionality of any historical construction. The metafictional aspects of these texts declare their representationality and their blatant constructedness. A foregrounding of textuality through various literary techniques that highlight the conditional

representation of the past. Novels often include a polyphony of voices that engage in competing narratives. Thus, we are presented different versions of the same event. History is replaced by "histories." The arbitrariness of any historical reconstruction is also revealed in either the absence of closures or a variety of alternative endings. Finally, these texts often contain a "narratee" or surrogate reader who openly comments on the narration. This character may criticize the narrator's particular reconstruction of events but also serves to alert the reader to the novelist's awareness of the arbitrariness of the whole enterprise.

The metafictional aspects of these texts reveal the contemporary writer's ambivalent relationship with storytelling. As readers, we are often left to determine for ourselves whether a particular writer is lauding or undermining the power of narrative. In these circumstances, the act of poetic imagination is revealed as an attempt to *construct*, not *discover*, the truth of the past.

Nevertheless, all of this highlights the degree to which, despite our postmodern *knowing* vantage point, we can never entirely do away with narrative. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks examines our desire *for* and *of* narrative. We might invoke Brooks's concept of "narrative desire" to explain our compulsion to instill order by imposing some pattern on the chaos of history. Plot assuages our need to give things meaning and aids in the soothing of these various anxieties.

Brooks suggests that the impulses that propel writing and reading forward are the same since they are actions committed in our drive for meaning. Both actions implicitly communicate some progress toward meaning and their very

structuration postulates some ordering of experience into a comprehensible and knowable form. The shaping qualities of plot, he notes, give meaning where none may have existed before. Narrative is thus a product of, and a consequent attempt to quench, our desire to know.

Brooks also argues that the loss of a "sacred masterplot" in the nineteenth century leads to "narrative anxiety" and the creation of alternative plots that might fill this void. This absence of a communal narrative explains the nineteenth century's "obsession with questions of origin, evolution, progress, genealogy, its foregrounding of the historical narrative as par excellence the necessary mode of explanation and understanding" (6-7). But have these obsessions really changed? If we follow Lyotard's line that the postmodern period is characterized by an incredulity to metanarratives, then one might explain the recent fixation on history in literature as a product of this same anxiety. And while the nature of the anxiety may have changed, some recourse emerges to the same palliatives.

The reading of these novels concerned with history furthermore reflects our desire for meaning and ends. While all of these authors might be said to have a "passion for and of meaning," to paraphrase Barthes, these texts construct this passion through strongly differing impulses, which determine their various approaches to narrative. Hayden White postulates that the historian adopts a mode of emplotment (romance, comedy, tragedy, satire) and that this further dictates both the mode of explanation and the mode of ideological implication

employed by the author. In other words, the choice of plot-structure is highly revealing of the historian's own relationship to history and the impulses for tackling the past in a particular manner. The same can certainly be said of the novelist who manifests an interest in the historical past. Brooks and White demonstrate a concern for the constructedness of narrative and focus on the manner in which meaning is fabricated through the sequencing of events in a narrative line. The emplotment reveals as much about the subject as it does about the object. Brooks points out that fictional narratives almost always tell us the manner in which they are meant to be read, while White stipulates that the form of both the novel and the historical narrative follows a shaping or containing principle that limits the number of possible interpretations of a set of events.

If we accept the writer of fiction as a particular kind of historian, then we can abstract White's notion of emplotment to the novels under consideration. The choice of plot reflects both the novelist's attitudes toward history and indicates what he or she wishes to tell about the past. White suggests:

Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic . . . depends upon the historian's decision to *configure* them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or *mythos* rather than another. (*Tropics* 84)

Those imperatives remain the province of the author who determines what kind of story he or she intends to tell about the past. These various fictional permutations of the past indicate the extent to which there is a collective self-conscious awareness of "histories" rather than History. Such variability raises the question what desire is being satisfied, or at least momentarily satiated, in the construction of the author's particular choice of narrative? As White suggests, every historical reconstruction is a "metahistory" - a series of commitments on a number of levels (aesthetic, cognitive, ethical) - which illustrates the dynamics of desire in the writer's own particular relationship to the past (*Tropics* 71).

While White's theory of emplotment may encounter resistance when addressing the *actual* past, it does help us understand the kinds of stories writers of fiction produce and why they produce them. White asks:

What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? In the enigma of this wish, this desire, we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general, an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity.

(*Content* 4)

White's terminology of "fantasy" highlights its artifice, and he frequently points to the ways in which narrativized events have very little to do with the way

events occur in real life. He observes that "narrative strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time" (*Content* 11). In other words, in the very process of creating these soothing and coherent narratives, we also reveal our own fears and dreads about the meaninglessness of it all and the destructive power of time. White's approach helps us to understand the formulations of various plots and their subsequent appeasement of different desires. Byatt's *Possession* displays a distaste for the (postmodern) present through an expressed urge to return to Victorian ideals and a manifestation of a romantic/erotic nostalgia for the nineteenth century. McEwan's *Black Dogs* explores the potentially crippling existence of a traumatic cultural past and the narratives we construct as coping mechanisms. Finally, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* offers a rereading of the colonial past and an examination of a narcissistic urge for agency in the whirl of history.

This near-obsession with history in contemporary fiction has led to a number of critical attempts to categorize and redefine the genre of the historical novel. Examining these various critical attempts will allow us to identify the paradoxes and dilemmas at the heart of narrative's relationship with the past. Steven Connor proposes that we conceptualize the change in the relationship between fiction and history in the following manner:

where the role of narrative might once have been to call its audiences into the position of the subject of history, narrative in the postwar world has been much more sceptically or modestly concerned to investigate the conditions of possibility under which history may be narratable at all. (*English* 133)

Contemporary writers, self-aware of their limitations as they are, frequently stop to examine the process by which they have constructed history. Since the past remains a "foreign country," known only by the textual traces it leaves behind as a history already-read, we strive to find some concrete explanation for the persistence of a narrativizing impulse that compels us to narrate stories we know to be partial, contingent, and incomplete.

Various attempts to identify this genre as postmodern, as something entirely distinct from the forms its literary predecessors took, may hamper more than help our understanding of the genre's evolution. Susana Onega sees few differences between this new historical novel and the ones written by Walter Scott since it demonstrates many of the same concerns, only now the voices do not belong to the dominant but to the subaltern (17). One might also posit that while contemporary fiction follows the tradition of the classic historical novel, it also manifests clear connections with modernism and its experimental approaches to history. The principal difference between present treatments of history and the modernist approach is that the latter focused on the psyche with its effect on the individual subject, rather than on history itself. Recognizing the

ways history is contaminated by both desire and subjective memory, contemporary writers incorporate a knowledge of the shortcomings of any historical representation within their own narratives. In any case, such deliberate attempts at asserting a text's contemporaneity may be detrimental to an understanding of that text's historical purpose. Del Ivan Janik suggestively points out that we have perhaps done these "historical" novels a disservice by attempting to fit them into this postmodernist literary taxonomy. What these novels have in common is

an affirmation of the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary existence. They are not written from, in, or of a perpetual present; in their various ways they insist upon and demonstrate the validity, necessity, and difficulty of acknowledging, confronting, and dealing with the past, both private and public. (Janik 162)

Whether we choose to label these texts as "postmodernist" seems almost incidental. What they reflect, as Janik points out, is the present concern with history as a means of understanding and coming to terms with our present condition. If the contemporary moment is to be known as the postmodern period, then so be it and these then are postmodern texts. Nevertheless, it is worth examining how the contemporary historical novel has been conceptualized in recent theory. At the same time, I shall introduce my own objections and additions to the present definition of the genre.

In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon identifies a particular category of contemporary fiction that she terms "historiographic metafiction." I begin with Hutcheon because this term is frequently invoked in discussions of contemporary novelists and their work. Historiographic metafiction is represented by "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages" (*Poetics* 5). She also observes that its "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (*Poetics* 5 Hutcheon's italics). It is worth noting at the outset that for Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction *is* postmodernist; in fact, she often equates it directly with postmodern fiction. In the index to *The Politics of Postmodernism*, for example, references to historiographic metafiction are listed under "postmodernism in fiction." In her view, postmodernism is primarily a matter of increased self-consciousness connected to all those Western values we have heretofore accepted as unified, unchanging, and transcendent, what Derrida has termed "logocentrism":

What [postmodern texts] say is that there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world - *and* that we create them all. That is their justification and their limitation. They do not exist "out there," fixed, given, universal, external; they are human constructs in history. This does not make them any the less necessary or

desirable. It does, however, as we have seen, condition their "truth" value. (*Poetics* 43)

Hutcheon concedes that the creation of narratives is still a desirable activity, indeed an unavoidable one. *A Poetics* touches on the contradictory impulses she sees governing postmodern thinking: a politically motivated desire to undermine any "master" narrative that would seek to impose its vision on others is balanced by a corresponding desire to formulate a narrative of one's own that invests the self with a greater degree of agency. Hutcheon contends that we still search for truth, but we do so now with the knowledge that there are no absolutes, a condition that requires us to display more tolerance and acceptance of alternate points of view.

In Hutcheon's view, postmodern fiction neither denies or asserts, since it is content to destabilize and live with its inherent contradictions. She argues that the most productive stance is one that accepts the contradictions and indeterminacies of this new way of thinking. In fact, she sees these paradoxes as the very impetus for contemporary creative output. To live in such a state would naturally create a desire to come to terms with what, for most people, would create differing levels of anxiety. Anxiety is not part of the equation for Hutcheon, however, since her writers manage confidently to question and subvert their various histories. Few of us, however, are simply resigned merely to live with this unavoidable anxiety so that we strive to find moments of solace from this disorientation. Hutcheon does not recognize the innate impulse to

counterbalance the chaos of our lives with something more solid and dependable, albeit temporary and provisional. Because anything determinate is totalizing and therefore potentially oppressive, her investment in indeterminacy requires that she ignore any unifying impulses that lie within a number of these fragmented, achronological, and open-ended novels.

The narrativization of history is propelled by two contradictory impulses – a desire to create a link with the past and a desire to break with it entirely. Despite her disclaimers, Hutcheon's reading of contemporary fiction is inclined towards the latter. Postmodern writers are not the first to be preoccupied with the idea of history, but they are the first to be anxiously concerned with it to this degree. Hutcheon argues that the accusation leveled at postmodernism by Jameson and Eagleton, that it is ahistorical is in fact more appropriate for modernism. The contemporary response to history is a reaction to the ahistoricity of modernist aesthetics. Finally, Hutcheon wishes to avoid any dialectical construction between past and present: "There is no desire to break with the past . . . but rather an attempt to inscribe a new historicity and a new problematizing of the notion of historical knowledge" (*Poetics* 218). She remains understandably vague as to what precisely this "new historicity" would look like, since her argument depends largely on things remaining indeterminate. Simply highlighting the problematics of historiographic thinking, however, does not adequately explain the renewed interest in history with fiction. While the desire may on occasion be to break away from the past and erase history, any reading of historiographic

metafiction illustrates the extent to which this can never be accomplished entirely. That these writers revisit the idea of history in a number of their works indicates the immanence of the past and the strength with which these narrative impulses persist in the individual writer. What Hutcheon refuses to acknowledge is the inherent need in all of us to make some kind of sense of the world, for though we live in a state of permanent problematization, we seek moments of respite which fiction may provide. The undermining of our certainties is a useful exercise, but to imagine that we wish to remain in a perpetual state of unknowing is simply unrealistic:

all metafictional self-reflexivity and auto-representation act to question the very existence as well as the nature of extratextual reference. But historiographic metafiction complicates this questioning. History offers facts – interpreted, signifying, discursive, textualized – made from brute events. Is the referent of historiography, then, the fact or the event, the textualized trace or the experience itself? Postmodernist fiction plays on this question, without ever fully resolving it. It complicates the issue of reference in two ways, then: in this ontological confusion (text or experience) and in its overdetermination of the entire notion of reference.

(Poetics 153)

Hutcheon plays with two terms that have elicited much debate: fact and event. Since the intertextuality of texts themselves constitutes the only way that history

can be rendered, this wall-to-wall textuality complicates our ability ever truly to grasp the thing itself. There is no way of resolving the question she poses, since we are always dealing with a textualized trace. The challenge is to determine how accurately the trace may reflect the event.

Hutcheon's twin focus on the problematizing of historical knowledge and the growing self-reflexivity of contemporary fiction underlines the contingent nature of various discourses. An awareness of these contingencies is indispensable in any reading of a postmodern fiction transformed by poststructuralist theories. A desire to create narrative is based on more than a need to problematize and subvert; it also derives from a need to assert and establish a story that one can believe. The traumatic and turbulent twentieth century, to which a number of these novels are a direct response, elicits a desire in the novelist to uncover some pattern that will allow him or her to make at least partial sense of the world he or she lives in. No matter what theorists may assert about the veracity of fictional reconstructions of history, readers will walk away believing they have acquired some knowledge about the way life was lived in the past and how that past connects with the present. The question remains, what kind of "knowledge" is this?

In her study of post-1960s First World fiction, *Sublime Desire* (2001), Amy Elias seeks a way out of Hutcheon's philosophical impasse by identifying the knowledge pursued by the metahistorical romancer as the "historical sublime." She equates "metahistorical consciousness" with "post-traumatic consciousness"

because it seeks to uncover narratives that will allow coping with a violent and disturbing past. She argues, however, that since history has revealed the inadequacies of First World narratives, this search becomes a problematic and, ultimately, fruitless one. History remains something to be desired but never known. This recognition, however, does not prevent postmodern writers from returning again and again to the depositories of the past. In fact, Elias contends that postmodernism is

characterized by an obsession with history and a desperate desire for the comforting self-awareness that is supposed to come from historical knowledge. But because of its philosophical and social underpinnings, postmodern art also projects skepticism and irony about the possibilities for true historical knowledge and suspicion of any social or historical narrative that purports to make sense of a chaotic world. (xvii)

Thus, texts which Elias labels "metahistorical romances" exhibit a paradoxical attitude to history; they manifest desire and supplication for a narrative that will explain the past while remaining thoroughly skeptical about the successful outcome of such a project. Desire and skepticism coexist side by side, and neither can extinguish the other. This leads Elias to posit a theory of the historical sublime: "a desired horizon that can never be reached but only approached in attempts to understand human origins and the meaning of lived existence" (xviii). In Elias's configuration, the quest for the historical sublime is

imbued with the capacity for political and cultural change. The return to the past is the search for alternatives to the status quo and prevailing dominant ideologies. This search in turn leads to the consideration and formulation of alternate modes of narrating, and thus constructing, reality.

Defining the historical sublime as the "secular-sacred," Elias maps out a place for it somewhere between theology and empiricism: "the space of desire that is paradoxically located in the 'space between' . . . *both* the ambiguity and relativism of disciplinary history *and* the dogmatism of totalizing history in theological and empirical contexts" (43). The pursuit of the sublime is one that seeks meaning beyond that imposed by social construction; it cannot be represented because it exists on an inaccessible plane we can never truly know and only think. In contrast to Hutcheon's advocacy of indeterminacy, then, Elias suggests that metahistorical romancers intimate the existence of a *something other* than the present in which we live. The intimation of this otherness leads to the self-reflexivity and questioning that are central to metahistory and metafiction. From this perpetual striving emerges a sense of possibility, of things being other than they are. Thus, along with Lyotard and White, Elias recommends "an investiture in desire, the desire actualized in the quest for the spectral sublime, which is also, oddly, the quest for freedom, for certainty, for belief" (43).

Elias's emphasis on desire is significant to my purposes. The compulsion to create narrative, *narrative desire*, reflects a yearning for something that extends beyond our present conditions. It expresses the need for something more, a

pattern that subverts all other patterns while leaving open the possibility of new narratives. Again, in contrast to Hutcheon who privileges uncertainty, Elias's hypothesis depends strongly upon faith in the possibility of meaning; just because it cannot be identified and categorized, she insists, does not mean that it is not apprehensible. The existence of the historical sublime is a secondary concern in contrast to our faith in its possibility and consequent attempts to concretize our apprehensions. Fiction thus becomes the means of perpetuating both faith and desire and, in the process, of opening alternate modes for thinking about our lived existence.

In defining metahistorical romance, Elias proposes that "the postmodern historical imagination, as a post-traumatic imaginary, confronts rather than represents the historical sublime" (49). As noted earlier, the preoccupation with history in fiction can in part be attributed to a need to establish a new cultural identity in the light of those dark truths revealed in genocidal and cataclysmic events throughout the twentieth century. In Elias's conceptualization, the West finds itself obliged to acknowledge its participation and probable further involvement in traumatic history. The West, in turn, is traumatized by that recognition. As a result new works of fiction share many of the same characteristics as those reflected in the traumatized consciousness. As a product of a traumatic history, the metahistorical romance presents an anti-narrativist approach to that history, one reflecting its own fragmented and unstable condition. Despite the centrality of this proposition to her thesis, Elias does not

really pursue the idea of trauma in her analysis of metahistorical romances. For example, she refers sparingly to the Holocaust, in many ways the trauma *par excellence* of Western consciousness. I obviously agree with Elias's highlighting of the traumatized consciousness of the First World, though I would accord this cultural trauma greater weight in its motivating the production of a great number of fictional works including McEwan's *Black Dogs*, which I examine in Chapter Three.

Elias's emphasis on narrative's reflection of the traumatic consciousness can be directly connected to the pursuit of the historical sublime, since both are equally unrepresentable. As such, she proposes a link between the uncanny and the sublime in metahistorical romance, identifying the former as the realm that separates past from present, what Elias calls "the place revisited" (64-5). Since the re-narrated past is neither the true past nor the actual present, it exists on a plane that can never be pointed to and concretely identified. As we shall see, contemporary authors often turn to the supernatural as a means of signaling the ephemeral presence of the past (Byatt's spiritualism or Rushdie's magic realism, for example). All of these factors reflect the irresolution at the heart of the historiographic project. They underline the simultaneous but contradictory need to know *and* the need to repress the truths of the past while pointing to the impossibility of satisfying either urge completely. Despite its perpetual deferral, the space of history is something we can never relinquish the hope of situating.

Elias elaborates on these paradoxical urges when she contends that "the motivation for this movement and unceasing deferral of a historical ground in the metahistorical romance is a simultaneous distrust and assertion of *fabula* as a humanist value" (69). This distrust of *fabula* emerges from the belief, largely held by historians, that "to identify history with narrative is to identify history as the articulation of desire rather than the outcome of empirical investigation" (76). In the aftermath of poststructuralism and the undermining of emancipatory Enlightenment narratives by events in the twentieth century, writers struggle with the knowledge that their narratives are nothing more than constructions and the desire for them to be true. Elias concludes that the author "is caught between his distrust of *fabula* and his need for it, his longing for History after the narrative Fall" (84). The same observation could be applied to contemporary writers who struggle with their simultaneous distrust of and need for narrative in uncovering some truth about the traumatic past.

Elias's emphasis on desire and trauma shares a good deal with the impulses that guide this present study. Narrative becomes the means of expressing one's desire for relief from the trauma, either by incorporating it into a present history or by denying its power altogether. Our unfulfillable desires are thus manifested plainly in narratives we construct to capture the unrepresentable and absent past. She observes that

for the post-traumatic metahistorical imagination, history is desire,
the desire for the unceasingly deferred, sublime space of History.

The fabulatory impulses of metahistorical romance, in both postmodernist and postcolonialist incarnations, are one expression of this desire. This desire for History, for the 'secular sacred' sublime in the absence of the gods - for certainty, hope, and awe-inspiring illumination - leads to metahistorical representations of the past, narratives that end up being at least as much about what history *is* as about the characters and plots that appear in those narratives. (187-8)

Here Elias highlights the metahistorical aspects of this fiction, which she sees as offering a critique of history and traditional modes of historical representation. And like Hutcheon, she places emphasis on the assumption of self-consciousness as self-critique. However, her focus on what she terms the "secular-sacred" suggests that we still pursue some metanarrative that will confer a contingent meaning on our otherwise chaotic and temporally determined lives. And while the notion of the sublime may be a little more concrete than Hutcheon's indeterminacy, it still remains ungraspable, beyond the reach of any of us.

Like Hutcheon with historiographic metafiction, Elias eschews extended readings of any of the novels she identifies as metahistorical romances, preferring instead an analysis that conveys a general concern among First World writers for the *idea* of history. So that while both Hutcheon and Elias's texts signal successfully the circulation of ideas and anxieties in contemporary works of fiction, their studies necessarily fall short in conveying the ambivalences

inherent in the confrontation of history and fiction. Thus, one of the objectives of this study is to examine individual novels as a means of demonstrating the exertions and contortions these various novelists undergo in their attempts to make sense of the past.

David W. Price's *History Made, History Imagined* (1999) undertakes the reading of novels by Carlos Fuentes, Susan Daitch, Salman Rushdie, Michel Tournier, Ishmael Reed, Graham Swift, and Mario Vargas Llosa in order to present different manifestations of contemporary fiction's wrestling with the idea of history. Price establishes his starting point by citing Nietzsche's three forms of history: *monumental* which posits that the greatness of the past can be repeated); *antiquarian* which seeks to preserve and perpetuate tradition; and *critical* which revises, offering another version of the past. To this group, Price proposes the addition of a fourth type of history, *speculative "poietic" history*, which finds expression in the contemporary novel. For it is the novel, Price explains, "that allows writers to explore the boundaries of the possible in the past and bring to our awareness in the present the potential for self and social transformation" (42). We must move beyond the factual information provided by historical texts and engage in speculation as an alternative dynamics, one that allows us to consider what has been forgotten, distorted, or minimized in the rush of history. These novels thus allow for the reformulation of the past, liberating us from the confines of a monolithic and often uncritically accepted history. Price outlines three central components of novels of "poietic" history. First, these works all

demonstrate a prevailing concern with value-formation. Price thus signals a shift in historical emphasis away from epistemology to "axiology"; instead of seeing history as solely determined by ideas, we must focus also the influence and evolution of values. Second, novelists of poietic history are interested in how the future was configured in the past and how it may continue to be shaped in the present. Last, they examine the use of figurative language and its mythic underpinnings, uncovering the mythical aspects of history in the process.

Price observes that the question of value-formation in historical narratives is not a concern of many traditional histories. Contemporary fiction, on the other hand, reveals through imaginative reconstruction, the process by which certain values were propagated and privileged while others were pushed aside or diminished. Again, by emphasizing the degree to which narrative structures produce events, not the other way around, Price highlights the emancipatory aspects of the novels he examines. We are not confined by any one particular historical reading of the past, but rather we are free to contest dominant ideologies and their imposition of a particular historical trajectory. In other words, these authors all exercise their right to (literary?) self-determination. In contrast to presenting things from the viewpoint of the objective historian, novelists of poietic history present actions and values in the process of being exercised, history in the process of becoming. By gaining access to the emotional states of the characters, we can ascertain why certain actions were undertaken,

why events in the past unfolded as they did, and why certain values were endorsed over others.

Price is intent upon investing the works of these various authors with some political, cultural, or social agency. Rejecting the label of postmodernism, which he characterizes as too committed to indeterminacy, he argues that these novelists, in their rewriting of history, affirm both the possibility of positive actions and the creation of beneficial value-systems. Price refuses to saddle his authors with the postmodernist label because he contends this would only confuse the arguments he wishes to make. He disputes Hutcheon's construction that suggests these works of fiction question and contest, but provide no answer. He insists these writers "do more than 'dialogue with' the past. On the contrary, these novelists try to *think* history; that is, they see the novel as a form of speculative thinking that engages the poetic imagination in an attempt to construct, not discover, the truth of the past" (11).

Relevant to this study is Price's contention that these novelists are actually writing a form of history, of which he identifies three different modalities. Price defines the first modality as the "history of forgotten possibilities" (16). In this modality, writers such as Fuentes and Rushdie "call attention to the fact that we are not condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past; the past contains paths that were not followed, and these untrodden trails can be followed now, at the present moment" (17). Novels of counter-memory and critique constitute the second modality, works of fiction that "underscore the creation of the narrative

itself" (17). Although Price underlines the self-reflexivity of these texts, he carefully avoids using the word "metafiction," perhaps to steer clear of any connection with Hutcheon. In this modality, writers such as Ishmael Reed and Susan Daitch create novels that reconfigure the past through imaginative acts and in the process provide a means of making sense of the present. The third modality of poietic history is to be found in novels that write history as myth. Michel Tournier and Graham Swift, for example, "examine the mythic dimensions of all histories" (17). Of course, these modalities are not exclusive, and there may exist varying degrees of overlap from one text to the other. Each of these modalities underlines the need of the present to rewrite or re-narrate the past. As this study will show, the past is a source of a great number of anxieties, and this form of fictional history can help in relieving or soothing them. Again, Price frames the writing of these texts as a liberatory gesture, and one can thus read the texts as attempts by the individual for liberation from the shackles of any number of cultural narratives that curtail possibilities and thus contribute to a set of cultural anxieties.

Invoking Nietzsche, Price proclaims that these novelists of poietic history seek "to destroy accepted notions of the past in general and history in particular" (297). This fairly grandiose statement implies the eradication of something, unless we accept that an object is entirely different from itself once aspects of it have been altered. These writers

set about in their own way to take the discourses of history, the various extant historiographies related to particular periods (be they sixteenth-century Europe or twentieth-century India), interpolate them with other discourses, and modify, mythologize, transform, and crush them under the weight of an opposing discourse of the novel that at the same time articulates distinct values opposed to the values in the dominant historical discourses. (297-8)

But these writers are *not* postmodernists, Price insists, because unlike the creators of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, they "seek to create through destroying – theirs is an axiological endeavor, not an act of indeterminacy that focuses exclusively on questions of epistemology" (298). Price also rejects the indeterminate status that Hutcheon allots to these works of fiction. He argues that the novelists in question "do more than problematize values; they actively promote them" (298). Hutcheon's theory simply leaves us asking what we should do next; in contrast, the novelists in his study actively pursue solutions and new values. He also questions the extent to which indeterminacy, ambiguity, and undecidability can be subversive and argues that a coherent narrative, no matter how partial, needs to be constructed about the past: "I prefer totalizing explanations in the form of the novel, not because I see such explanations as complete or inescapable, but because I see the drive to totalize as necessary if we are to comprehend fully the ramifications of our

conceptualizations of the past" (300). Price touches here on our need and desire for narrative as a means of making sense of our world. By proposing that novels can provide models for value and meaning, however provisional, Price suggests an outlet from Hutcheon's impasse of indeterminacy that is more concrete than Elias's historical sublime.

Relevant to this study is the idea that release and relief can still be found in narrative and in particular emplotments. An alternate plotting of events can lead to a reconsideration of historical narratives we have simply come to accept. It is important to note here that just because a story can be formulated in different ways does not mean that each construction is of equal value or significance. In fact, some stories may prove themselves to be inflexible to certain kinds of replotting, leading to a sense of falsity in the reader. The emplotment of details necessitates their unification into some kind of narrative whole. For Hutcheon and others this is a problem, however, since it suggests a totalizing vision. This critique may, in fact, do more harm than good since it hampers the narrative impulse conditioned in all of us. As Brian McHale points out, our supposed incredulity to metanarratives has led to a "paralyzing anxiety *not to be seen to narrate*" (*Constructing* 6). He proposes two solutions to this paralysis: either we conclude that there is no such thing as a metanarrative, or we learn to tolerate our anxiety, not *give in* to it, and create narratives knowing their limitations:

Rather than letting one's discourse be shaped, or rather deformed, by the desire to evade and deflect accusations of metanarrativity,

better to try to tell as good a story as possible, one that makes the richest possible sense of the phenomenon in question and provokes the liveliest possible critical scrutiny, controversy, counter-proposals and (yes, why not?) counter-stories. (*Constructing* 6)

As we shall see, the novelists included in this study exhibit various anxieties about their present conditions and the extent to which those conditions have been dictated by prior narratives. All seek a release from the shackles of narratorial predetermination by reconfiguring those narratives and by re-narrating the past through a particular emplotment.

This study explores the way three contemporary British authors attempt to assuage their anxieties toward history through narrative construction. Each attempts to control the ambiguities of history and our ability truly to know it by allowing historical fact and fiction to merge, overlap, and create a new whole. A. S. Byatt, Ian McEwan, and Salman Rushdie, in different ways, employs what has become known as postmodern artifice, sometimes as a way to reject the notion of historical construction, sometimes to advocate it, but always to bring us closer to what they believe are significant values and truths. Using this approach, I will show how these novels reflect a number of cultural anxieties about the various narratives that have been constructed to explain the past: Byatt contests the postmodern dismissal of Victorian ideologies in the working through of narratives; McEwan requires a reassessment of the Enlightenment narrative in the face of the collective trauma of the twentieth century's violent history; and

Rushdie re-narrates recent Indian history in order to find an issue out of the impasse of fundamentalist and monolithic conceptions of national identity.

I begin with an examination of Byatt's "Neo-Victorian fiction" and *Possession: A Romance* in particular, as an appropriate starting point for a discussion of these issues. Like many of her other works, the novel's action takes place in an academic setting. Hers are scholarly, often academic, works of fiction that incorporate a good deal of Byatt's own experiences as lecturer, critic, and writer of reviews. Her novels struggle to present both sides of the story, the plot itself and the deconstructing of it – what it all meant to mean, to her, to us, to her characters. As a result, Byatt writes a form of fiction that is always conscious of itself. This aspect of her work has led various critics to identify her as a postmodern writer. In fact, one general area of debate surrounding *Possession* has been whether one can consider it an example of "postmodernism" and whether A. S. Byatt herself can truly be called a postmodernist. While an argument can certainly be made that Byatt uses postmodernist techniques such as metafiction, fragmentation, intertextuality, she also exhibits a wariness of things postmodern, so much so that Michael Levenson has labeled her that rarest of hybrids, the "postmodern Victorian." In many of her texts, but particularly *Possession*, Byatt exhibits an anxiety about postmodernism and its negation of meaning.

Byatt's conviction is that our present lives are somehow less vibrant or vital than those of our ancestors, because something has been lost. She seeks to

recuperate that essence through an establishment of a link with the past. She does not want to return us to a Victorian past but to highlight the links that exist between it and the present day. The title of Byatt's text exposes her own desires to "possess" the past, not unlike her modern-day protagonists who are propelled by a narrative curiosity that is, in turn, shared by the reader. Byatt satiates this desire for connection through narrative and emplotment, reconstructing a past that corroborates her presentation of a diminished present. She accomplishes this in two ways. First is her emphasis on coherence and closure - a return to Victorian methods of plotting - and a sense that we can know the "whole" story. Byatt blatantly eschews current narrative practice by resorting to an omniscient narrator at three key points in the novel. She also provides a Postscript in which a significant component in the novel's mystery is revealed, providing a degree of closure not found in more skeptical postmodern texts. Second, she engages in what she terms "ventriloquism" and an attempt to resurrect the dead by speaking in their voices. Byatt thus practices a form of "literary spiritualism" where the author acts as a medium for the voices of the dead, thus physically bridging the gap between the past and the present. Byatt channels the voices of the past, fervently secure in her belief that she is communicating some measure of "truth" about the Victorian period.

Such writerly convictions though are contingent upon the possession of other key abilities. Ventriloquism is depends ultimately on some affective and empathetic reading of the past. While trafficking with the dead poses certain

dangers, to which particular characters fall victim, it also offers a number of rewards for the individual who is able to *feel* the past, which means to some extent, to *read* it. Byatt's novel presents a hierarchy of approaches to history, some more persuasive and fruitful than others. Her characters struggle with the question of whether they control the past or whether it controls them. The text of *Possession* implies that there are proper and improper ways of taking possession of the past, while maintaining one's present sense of identity in the world.

I next examine Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* as an expression of the author's distinctly contemporary anxieties. McEwan's protagonists struggle and are made anxious by their lived reality, their present. The text also presents a concerted effort to unify and contextualize distinct voices into a coherent narrative. McEwan frames his narrative as an investigation - his narrator struggles to uncover the true significance of an event that occurred in the past. But a number of elements also distinguish the two texts. While *Possession* is concerned with how the present treats the past and what this says about the present, McEwan's characters contend with their knowledge of the past and how that impinges on their present. And the anxieties in McEwan's text emanate from a much different source since they are directly connected to living in a post-Holocaust world, one in which metanarratives that once provided solace, communal coherence, and consensus no longer hold. The novel exhibits all the characteristics of a post-traumatic consciousness: the endless replay of the event, the inexpugable feeling of something lost forever, and the striving to fit the

event into a palatable narrative. The dilemmas confronted by the characters of *Black Dogs* are the same that Western civilization is forced to reckon with in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The inability to explain or understand the evil that has befallen them gives rise to competing narratives as each individual strives to find an explanation that will relieve his or her fears.

McEwan's construction of a continuum of violence makes clear that the "black dogs" exist in all of us and that they can never be eradicated entirely. The dogs are a product of the Holocaust and represent its lasting legacy. Like the spores of the millions of dead that blanket Europe, they are part of a past that continues its affliction on the European present. The Holocaust set a dark and dangerous precedent; a moral line was crossed, and that crossing has engendered further incursions. The recent resurgence of extreme right-wing and fascist groups throughout Europe makes clear that the evil that spawned the Nazi terror has not been purged.

McEwan also underlines the need for empathy in any historical reconstruction, an empathy that must extend to all the participants in the drama, not simply those with whom we share an emotional affinity. He highlights the significance of what Dominick LaCapra calls "secondary memory," the construction of memory in the minds of individuals who were not present when events in the past occurred, in this case the reader. Jeremy, the narrator of McEwan's novel, is just such a reader who tries to disentangle the significance of an event that happened before he was born. In the process, Jeremy reveals a

postmodern ambivalence towards any narrative that would claim to make sense of the past. The text's presentation of competing narratives, as well as its episodic and fragmented form, highlight the discrepancies that prevent the amalgamation of the different narratorial strands into a coherent structure, and hence the discovery of truth. Assailed by these doubts and uncertainties, Jeremy nevertheless feels compelled to give the events some formal structure to create meaning from Europe's recent past.

While the novel maintains its achronological and episodic form for the first three parts, it dramatically shifts to a traditional narrative in its final section. Despite the occasional nod to historical misinterpretation, Part IV demonstrates that despite all we know about the inadequacies of historical narrative, there still exists an almost-universal compulsion to make sense of the past. No matter the extent to which our version of things may be disconfirmed, we still endeavor to formulate a narrative that appeases our particular needs and soothes our anxieties. We can thus conceive of narrative as an exercise in compromise and a struggle to get reality to concede as much as it will to the desiring self. McEwan's narrator recognizes the incontestable fact that reality will almost always fall short of his desires. He may be able to manipulate history, but he cannot transform it. Having proclaimed the insurmountable challenge that faces the historian or analyst, Jeremy nevertheless undertakes to tell the story of the black dogs.

Like Byatt and a number of other contemporary writers, McEwan exhibits a paradoxical relationship with the past. He knows that it cannot be known, but this does not prevent him from trying to know it. And the truths that are unearthed, whether they be the *real* truths of the past or not, are not any less true for that. So while Hutcheon sees postmodernism as a "contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (*Poetics* 3), it is possible to read many texts as finally expressing an incapability of living *entirely* in uncertainty. Byatt and McEwan both feel compelled to offer versions of complete and ordered narratives.

While the narrators of these new historical novels (even Byatt's Roland and Maud narrate their own particular version of Victorian romance) tell their stories to exercise some control over the past, and thus their present, none does so more than Saleem Sinai. In contrast to the two previous texts, a faith in narrative is declared from the start of Salman Rushdie's novel. In the case of Rushdie's text, this faith only truly begins to unravel when it reaches its conclusion. While the progression of the narrative is thus dramatically different, the construction of the text is meant to serve much the same purpose. Like *Possession* and *Black Dogs*, *Midnight's Children* contains its own textual contradictions; we are presented a self-contained narrative that simultaneously exposes its own limitations and subjectivities.

I analyze Rushdie's solipsistic but conflicted approach to history in *Midnight's Children* where historical events occur on an intimately personal level. Saleem, as

narrator, tells a sometimes paranoid tale of India's history after Independence. And although he appears helpless before the events that unfold in his life, the construction of the narrative invests him with a considerable degree of agency. He may occasionally admit to unreliability and error, but he nonetheless feels that his version of events is somehow the true one. Rushdie's way of personalizing history and of conflating public with private events highlights the role of subjectivity in the construction of historical narratives. Saleem's conviction that the historical events of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 and the Emergency of 1975 occurred as direct responses to his existence can be seen as an extension of the historian reading a particular meaning into an event due to his inescapable subjective viewpoint. And while the reader is aware of the untenability of Saleem's arguments, that the war of '65 was conducted specifically to eliminate his family and that the Emergency was Indira Gandhi's way of destroying all of *Midnight's Children*, there remains an underlying suspicion that while these may not have been major, or even minor, reasons for the events that they were nevertheless sought-after results. This observation requires some elaboration. Saleem's family and the *Midnight's Children* represented a portion of the community that was indeed targeted for extermination under Gandhi's regime. As such, Saleem's conviction that the *Midnight's Children* are somehow a microcosm of modern India is not without some basis in fact. Such conviction allows for the creation of a narrative that highlights the limitations of historical reconstruction while proposing some

imaginative alternatives. Saleem's close identification with India – one that is explicitly contrasted with Indira Gandhi's self-identification *as* India – allows him to uncover what he perceives as patterns in India's history that closely parallel occurrences in his own life.

Saleem undertakes a process of re-narration, insisting that what he tells the reader is true and rewriting history in order to open up a new dialogue with the past. Rushdie sees India as a victim of its own fundamentalism and monologic thinking. By revisiting the past, he illuminates paths not taken and he protests that the truth about the past has not been told. The impasses of the present can be controverted with a reading of the past, with the uncovering of narratives that were repressed or never even considered. Justification for the construction of historical narratives thus resides in its supposed ability to expose underlying structures of meaning that will invest present events with significance. If indeed "patterns" do exist, then their identification will serve as a means of predicting the future. The recognition of such patterns will also serve as a way of intimating the historical past. In *Midnight's Children*, the patterns are constructed through an ordering of private experience that is then imposed upon the historical. Rushdie's text is clearly meant as a rereading and rewriting of history. The very contingencies that it elicits and the constructions that it questions raise the possibility that this revisionist history may also be reread and rewritten at some later point in time. Therefore, an anxiety is fostered in the very act of propounding one version of the past rather than another. At that point, the

anxiety must be actively countered by a conviction that one's version is the truest one possible. Such remains the purpose of Saleem's narrative that, despite its ambivalence and admitted errors, presents itself as one "true" version of the nation's past.

CHAPTER 2

TO SPEAK WITH THE DEAD: *POSSESSION* AND BYATT'S NEO-VICTORIAN FICTION

A Postmodern Victorian?

Over the course of her career, both literary and academic, A. S. Byatt has revealed a prevailing concern for the past and meanings we derive from it. This concern is most clearly exhibited in her "Neo-Victorian" fiction, works in which a principal part of the plot occurs in the past, in particular the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹ Although Byatt has written other Neo-Victorian texts, most notably the short story "Precipice-Encurled" and the two novellas in *Angels and Insects*, *Possession* most fully explores her, and our, desires for possessing the past.

Because the novel is a text aware of its own relative construction of history, a number of critics have identified *Possession* as a postmodern novel, pointing to it as an example of what Linda Hutcheon has dubbed "historiographic metafiction."² Byatt's critical and academic background mean that she is well-versed in the language and techniques of both poststructuralism and postmodernism. As such, her self-conscious texts openly reflect upon and

question their own historicizing processes. At the same time, these texts and *Possession* in particular express the conviction that some truth can be derived from a proper reading of the past. So Byatt's novel does play the postmodern game by showing the modern-day struggles of academics hampered by theory and the inaccessibility of the past. On another level, however, Byatt cannot prevent herself from creating an entirely coherent narrative in which all of the questions raised in the text are answered. In direct opposition to those postmodernist tenets she supposedly espouses, Byatt adopts wholeheartedly formal techniques reminiscent of that found in the Victorian novel. Byatt has made no secret of her rejection of contemporary theoretical trends and her conviction that these have done a great disservice to her literary predecessors. *Possession* reads both as Byatt's homage to the past and apologia for the present.

There is no question that Byatt undermines the majority of the historical reconstructions put forth in her novel, but ultimately the novel is not so adamant in its condemnation of artifice. First, in her approval of the ventriloquist poetry of Ash and then in her privileging of the plot constructed by Roland and Maud about the Ash-LaMotte affair, Byatt affirms the possibility of creating plausible narratives about the past. Byatt does doubt but refuses to live in uncertainty, as Hutcheon stipulates every good postmodernist should. Another feature of Byatt's novel identified as postmodernist is her use of "paratexts": letters, diaries, poems, fairy tales. The presence of these paratexts produces a paradoxical effect investing the primary narrative with a greater degree of authenticity but also

highlighting the mediating nature of texts. This collage emphasizes the disjointedness of *Possession's* plot and its fragmentary nature, thus complicating the totalizing impulses found in the narrative. It is worth noting, however, that while these texts do disrupt any feeling of seamlessness in the plot, they do contribute simultaneously to the creation of a series of correspondences and connections that actually serve to pull the various elements of the story together.

With its immediate concern for existence in a postmodern age, *Possession* seeks to emphasize the ways in which it is distinctly *unpostmodern*. If Byatt is in fact writing historiographic metafiction, there should be some sense that the novel troubles both our sense of the past *and* the present. In *Possession*, however, it is really *only* the present subjected to destabilization. The past remains a fairly stable, and desired, homogeneous entity. While the novel would appear to follow the postmodernist tenets of indeterminacy and incompleteness for the participants in the plot, Byatt offers a good deal more to the reader. The characters are trapped in a postmodern world from which only the reader is afforded an escape.³ Jackie Buxton suggests that "*Possession* may not celebrate the postmodern, but what it *does* do as a literary text is seduce the reader into the consumption of Victorian poetry (or its simulacrum)" (216-7). One might take Buxton's argument a couple of steps further and suggest that Byatt entices her readers by presenting a Victorian novel disguised in postmodern trappings and persuading them to ingest not only Victorian poetry but the Victorian world-picture as a whole.

Thus Byatt's work invites interpretation as a direct, but ambivalent, response to the influences of poststructuralism and postmodernism.⁴ Largely, it rejects them. It contends that the over-intellectualization of our existence has moved us progressively away from the "real." In fact, Byatt reserves her most damning criticism for academic writing and theory, whose shallowness and artificiality have contributed to literature's growing distance from anything concrete, or "things" or "facts" as she often labels them.

Byatt's own literary philosophy is easily ascertained from her numerous critical writings. For example, on more than one occasion, Byatt refers to two statements made by Graham Greene and Iris Murdoch respectively.⁵ In an essay on Mauriac, Greene argues that after Henry James "the religious sense was lost in the English novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act. It was as if the world of fiction had lost a dimension: the characters of such distinguished writers as Mrs. Virginia Woolf and Mr. E. M. Forster wandered like cardboard symbols through a world that was paper-thin" (qtd. in *Passions* xv). As we shall see, Byatt does not believe the postmodernists have captured that depth of experience either. In an essay entitled "Against Dryness," to which Byatt frequently refers, Iris Murdoch laments the loss of the "hard idea of truth" which has been replaced with the "facile idea of sincerity." Along with Murdoch, a writer whom she sees as a kindred spirit, Byatt bemoans the antihumanist turn that has affected a great deal of literary and cultural studies. Lauding the work of Ford Madox Ford, Byatt observes:

In our time, when we too often see language as a system singing to itself, conducting us and closing us from the world it tells to us, it is more than pleasant, it is necessary, to have a Ford, with his hopes of accuracy, to teach us to write fiction, to distinguish what Iris Murdoch called "the hard idea of truth" from "the great lie."

(*Passions* 108)

Byatt appears to concede that these antihumanist observations have some bearing on our lives; however, we are much the poorer for our single-minded adoption of them. The world now exists at a distance, cut off from us by the very words that should, Byatt believes, bring it closer. To submit to poststructuralist tendencies is simply to prevent oneself from grasping the "truths" that are there to be grasped. In this vein, Byatt observes: "However initially attractive, even apparently 'true' the idea might be that all our narratives are partial fictions, the wholesale enthusiastic acceptance of that way of thought removes both interest and power, in the end, from both art and the moral life" (*Passions* 17). It is this loss of power or vibrancy that is one of the central themes of *Possession*. In her novel, she looks back to a time prior to Henry James when writers, even fictional ones, wrote imbued with "the importance of the human act." Her contemporary figures, Roland and Maud, clearly suffer from the malaise outlined by Murdoch since theirs is a "dryness" that is exposed through contrast with their Victorian ancestors. They are near-paralyzed by their knowledge of the constructedness, arbitrariness, and contingency of all their conclusions and observations.

This theme is dealt with extensively and almost inclusively in *The Biographer's Tale*. In the opening pages of the novel, Byatt's narrator and protagonist, Phineas Gilbert Nanson, describes his sudden disillusionment with all things poststructuralist and his abandonment of his pursuit of becoming a "postmodern literary theorist."⁶ On the first page he explains his discontent with current academe: "All the seminars, in fact, had a fatal family likeness. They were repetitive in the extreme. We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and deceptions beneath, no matter what surfaces we were scrying" (BT 1). This mirrors Byatt's conviction that literature has become nothing more than a jumping-off place for a great number of theoretical approaches and therefore has very little to do with life itself. The implication, rapidly solidified in the novel, is that theory has only served to take us one further remove away from reality. This is expressed in the novel through the narrator's desire to "have *things*" (BT 2). Gazing at a window above the class, he voices his frustration with language(s) that would prevent him from grasping the thing: "I know a dirty window is an ancient, well-worn trope for intellectual dissatisfaction and scholarly blindness. The thing is, that the thing was also there. A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*" (BT 2). The word-choice is not accidental. The word "thing" remains ambiguous enough to suggest pre-linguistic existence, a being that does not need language to make it exist. Language seems to interfere with, rather than facilitate, our apprehension of the thing. We are so focused on the words that the thing itself disappears.

Announcing his intention to leave theory behind, Phineas is steered, almost by happenstance, to the work of Scholes Destry-Scholes, the biographer of Elmer Bole, an eighteenth-century explorer. Phineas tells his advisor, Ormerod Goode, of his desire for facts. Goode replies: "The richness . . . the surprise, the shining solidity of a world full of facts. Every established fact - taking its place in a constellation of glittering facts like planets in an empty heaven, declaring *here* is matter, and *there* is vacancy - every established fact illuminates the world"(BT 4). While we can never know everything, the text suggests, we can always know more, working our way towards everything. Biography represents a natural progression to write about something that is past and complete, an individual's life. "What can be nobler," Goode asks Phineas, "or more exacting, than to explore, to continue, to open, a whole man, a whole opus, to us?" (BT 5). Other than the three-volume work on Bole, however, Phineas can collect very little information on Scholes's next project, or on Scholes himself for that matter. He gathers together scraps, a thirty-seven page manuscript and a series of index cards, that all directly or loosely relate to one of three people: Carl Linnaeus, Francis Galton, or Henrik Ibsen. He is unable to determine, however, what the nature of the project was, or indeed if it was one project or three separate ones. Like the scholars in *Possession* and "Precipice-Encurled," the narrator of *The Biographer's Tale* attempts to piece together a coherent narrative from textual traces left by the past. In this case, however, he is analyzing traces of traces, since

he intends to write the biography of a biographer (one can certainly make a connection here with the idea of history as already-lived, already-recorded).

Making their way through this "patchwork, echoing book," as Byatt calls it in her acknowledgments (*BT* 264), readers are bound to feel much the same exasperation Phineas experiences as he confronts these fragmented and, to some extent, dissimilar texts. The three subjects of Scholes's notes seem themselves to be engaged in analogous activities, striving for systems that will help them make sense of the world. As in *Possession*, Byatt offers a *mise en abîme* here; Phineas strives to make sense of Scholes making sense of his three subjects' sense-making. Byatt's characters sometimes act as "taxonomers" as they formulate schematizations that will compile disparate elements into some semblance of coherence. In *Morpho Eugenia*, Harald Alabaster, the master of Bredley House, offers Adamson, Byatt's protagonist, some employment. Over the years he has amassed a large collection of zoological specimens that have never properly been catalogued but instead sit rotting in their crates. When Adamson asks him what he would like him to do, Alabaster replies: "Set it all in order, don't you know? Make sense of it, lay it all out in some order or another" (*Angels* 28). The challenge that Alabaster sets for Adamson also faces Byatt and the reader.

These same dynamics are repeated in *The Biographer's Tale*. While the possibility of organizing a system that will explain everything is impossible, a system will still explain some things. In the novel, Byatt makes direct reference to Foucault's *The Order of Things*, and posits that "the germ of [her] novel lies long

ago in my own first reading of Foucault's remarks on Linnaeus and taxonomy" (BT 264). In fact, Phineas momentarily considers including several pages from Foucault's text within his own manuscript (BT 114-5). Foucault's remarks on Linnaeus may be relevant to an understanding of Byatt's novel, but not as much as his thoughts on the imposition of order and the role of language in any taxonomy.

In his Preface to *The Order of Things*, Foucault recalls the effects of a story by Borges that sets up a taxonomy of unlikely and incompatible elements. Foucault notes that we are meant to see the disparities and to note the limitations of any classification system as well. That Borges can create such a list, Foucault argues, attests to the true malleability of words. "Where else," he asks, could these elements "be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language?" This would seem to endow language with unmatched powers, but Foucault quickly adds,

Yet though language can spread them before us, it can do so only in an unthinkable space . . . we shall never succeed in defining a stable relation between contained to container between each of these categories and that which includes them all. (*Order* xvi - xvii)

Much of Byatt's fiction is haunted by this dilemma. She or her characters can construct systems, but they are systems raised on linguistic foundations that have no "real" basis in the world. Her characters remain intrinsically aware of the arbitrariness of choosing one method of categorization over another, and of the illusory semblance of order or correspondence constructed by the taxonomer

through language. Words bestow similarity and stability upon what is essentially a chaotic and mysterious world. Foucault highlights the arbitrariness and subjectivity of any taxonomic methodology:

Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression. (*Order xx*)

Our universe can thus be conceived as a blank space over which we impose various grids in the hopes of making sense of it. But that ordering system, much like language, imposes its own perspective upon the thing it names or orders. Both Foucault's observation and the inevitable conclusion about discursive language apply directly to Byatt's novel.

In the end, Phineas recognizes his engagement in writing an "autobiography," and he speaks of the fashionability of the form at the moment (*BT 250*). He decides to stop but confesses that he has "become addicted to writing – that is, to setting down the English language, myself, in arrangements chosen by me, for – let it be admitted – pleasure. I have become addicted to forbidden words, words critical theorists can't use and writers can" (*BT 250*). These words bear some similarity to those the narrator of *Possession* uses to describe Roland's

transformation. But what are these words, precisely, that writers can use but theorists cannot? The text intimates they are strongly linked to sensuality, but surely Barthes and Foucault have used similar language. Phineas struggles to find words to describe the two women he loves. And what is this "pleasure" that Phineas speaks of and why does it require confession? That pleasure is the control that language allows him to exert over the world as he perceives it. Again, we are dealing with the concept of language as pure communication, pure correspondence between the word and the thing being described, something clearly out of the reach of theoretical language. Ultimately, Phineas realizes that he could write "not autobiographical travel books - but useful guides, with bits of 'real' writing in them for those necessary non-destructive ecological tourists" (BT 257). This "real writing" combines his desire to write with practical solutions, a decision no doubt reached through Fulla's influence. Significantly, *The Biographer's Tale* ends with Phineas putting away his notebook as Fulla approaches. Phineas's metamorphosis from potential literary theorist to taxonomer of bees reflects Byatt's own feelings about "real writing," somehow returning to a source where words were not so weighed down and encumbered by a focus on their constructedness.

History is important for Byatt largely on the level of language, which has undergone so many transmutations and transformations that it has been progressively removed from its origins. Byatt's text returns constantly to the frustration that all we have is language and that it is inadequate. Having

admitted this, she strives to push language to explain our experience, and she laments the recent linguistic turn which stipulates that language works through us as an ideological manifestation of our present situation and, therefore, we do not control it so much as it controls us. Byatt yearns to return to an earlier time, if it ever really existed, when the correspondence between words and things was clearer. The myth of Adam, as namer, as using words for the first time, unimpeded by previous uses or theoretical positions, is an idea to which Byatt is immensely attracted. To use words as though they are all "new-minted," to somehow bridge the gap between what one thinks and what one says, to make the signifier equal to the signified – though Byatt would surely not frame it in those terms – these are Byatt's yearnings and those of her characters Phineas Nanson, and Roland.

Possession begins in the London Library where we find Roland, an uninspired English postgraduate, in the midst of his research. The inciting incident is the discovery of two unfinished letters by Randolph Henry Ash, a famous Victorian poet and the object of Roland's study. The passion of these letters, and the unknown identity of their intended recipient, sets Roland on a chase that will eventually lead to a lesser known poet, Christabel LaMotte. He engages the help of a LaMotte scholar, Maud Bailey, and the two pursue various leads that will help them uncover the secrets of the Ash-LaMotte liaison. The novel weaves together a number literary forms such as detective fiction, the Romance novel,

biography, the epistolary novel, campus fiction as it juxtaposes the modern world of the scholars with the Victorian world of their subjects.

The problematic relationship with the past is highlighted to an even greater degree in *Possession* than in *The Biographer's Tale*. Again, Byatt directly juxtaposes literature and theory to the clear dismissal of the latter. In the novel, we are presented a sometimes scathing, sometimes humorous, portrayal of a group of academics that exhibit a wide range of responses to the past. Byatt holds back neither her contempt for the ego-driven careerists Cropper and Wolff, nor her pity for the pathetic drudges Nest and Blackadder. In *Possession*, (literary) history is often portrayed as a repository of knowledge, and this knowledge, in its various forms, will endow whoever possesses it with power over others. There are individuals who simply want to use the past for what it can give them rather than try to establish some form of respectful relationship with it. The text privileges those individuals who perform the latter action, and the novel portrays the evolution of Maud and Roland from constrained self-involved professionals into emotionally-developed individuals who grasp the past through their intuitive and poetic faculties.⁷ Characters like Fergus Wolff and Leonora Stern, however, have made the truth inaccessible by living solely in the realm of theory and reading the past world as though there is only one way to read it. Their turning inwards, either in focusing solely on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory or feminist readings of the past, prevent them from experiencing the 'real' and cause them to misread the past.

Initially, Maud and Roland are hampered by similar concerns. Limited to an over-examination of their inner lives they belong to a "theoretically knowing generation" that is crippled by self-consciousness. At one point, Maud notes,

"We are very knowing. We know all sorts of things, too – about how there isn't a unitary ego – how we're made up of conflicting, interacting systems of things – and I suppose we *believe* that? We know we are driven by desire, but we can't see it as they did, can we?"⁸

For Roland and Maud, the Victorians are characterized by a confidence and a passion that allows them to love uninhibited by thought. They, on the other hand, are constrained by an intense focus on their individual psyches. As Roland notes: "I think all the *looking-into* has some very odd effects on the desire" (P 290). Such an awareness leads them both to yearn for a life uncluttered, liberated from self-consciousness, figured in the image of the "empty clean white bed" for which they both express a desire. This craving for a "clean white bed" reflects a need to recapture the simplicity and assuredness of their ancestors.

The discovery of this mutual yearning is the first moment of real connection between the two characters in the novel. In fact, they are both surprised by the striking similarity of their wishes. Byatt suggests that their desire for a clean white bed embodies "a response to post-Freudian sexual clutter . . . and to intense market pressures of modern academic life" (*Interview* 86). This implies the Victorians had direct access to their feelings and passions and that they were not

restrained by concepts of the Id or of the Self. They felt and they acted. Or so it seems to Roland and Maud, who both suspect that they have lost touch or have been disconnected from that part of themselves, through their endless exposure to theory and psychoanalysis. Spurred by their simultaneous recognition, Roland suggests that they abandon their research for a day and do something different: "I just want to look at something, with interest, and without layers of meaning. Something new" (P 291). Can objects be entirely divested of meaning? Roland desires to see things for the first time, to return to a pure state in which those objects can be perceived untainted by the past or previous apprehensions of them.

The text appears to support the practicability of such an endeavor, because only when Roland and Maud free themselves from these shackles, divest themselves of any theoretical preconceptions, are they able to intuit and recreate the actions of their ancestors. On their trip to Yorkshire, it is only when they finally abandon their rigid historical approach that they begin to uncover real clues to the events of the past. The final pages of Chapter 14 announce a rebirth of sorts, preparing the way for the omniscience of the following chapter. The narration suggests that things can be seen anew, unburdened. The opening paragraph sets the tone for the pages that follow:

Something new, they had said. They had a perfect day for it. A day with the blue and gold good weather of anyone's primitive childhood expectations, when the new, brief memory tells itself

that this is what is, and therefore was, and therefore will be. A
 good day to see a new place. (P 291)

Other than an emphasis on the word "new" repeated three times, the paragraph conveys the need to capture the world unspoiled by experience or memory. If this is not nostalgia, it is at least a wish to live when the world was younger and less knowing. Roland and Maud slowly divest themselves of their inhibitions and their academic trappings, speaking of their separate relationships with Val and Fergus Wolff, liberating themselves, getting in touch with their emotions in much the same way their Victorian predecessors had. Roland persuades Maud, literally and figuratively, to let her hair down. As she does so, the narrator notes that Roland is "moved – not exactly with desire, but with an obscure emotion that was partly pity, for the rigorous constriction all that mass had undergone, to be so structured into repeating patterns" (P 295). Maud's hair is thus a thinly disguised symbol for their lives. They have been tied up in knotted patterns, endlessly repeating theoretical constructions, until this moment. As Maud frees her hair, Roland feels "as though something has been loosed in himself" and they both express a feeling of release (P 296). The two modern-day protagonists have liberated themselves from their poststructuralist shackles, and from this point onward they will make rapid strides in their uncovering of the Ash-LaMotte mystery.

But Roland's transformation near the end of the novel, from textual critic to poet, is Byatt's most explicit rejection of the current theoretical propensities of

academe. The narrator first announces the shift in Roland's way of thinking at the beginning of Chapter 24: "He was writing lists of words. He was writing lists of words that resisted arrangement into the sentences of literary criticism or theory" (P 467). What kinds of words are these exactly, and how are sentences in theory different from literary sentences? The text does not provide a clear answer, though it implies the superiority of verse to prose in its ability to communicate experience. The words themselves – *blood, clay, terracota, carnation*, among others – seem innocuous enough, and yet they signal a fundamental shift in the way Roland will perceive the world. This transition, in fact, leads Roland on a path that will bring him closer to Ash than ever before.

Roland's transformation from literary scholar, hopelessly mired in textual criticism, to poet, as a namer of things, is a pivotal moment in his connecting with the historical and literary past. This epigraph for Chapter 26 highlights the details of the final phase of Roland's aesthetic progression. All of the chapters in *Possession* begin with epigraphs, often excerpts from poems written by either Randolph Ash or Christabel LaMotte. Since Byatt composed these herself as simulacra of Victoriana the epigraphs are not to be ignored for they often comment directly on the contents of the chapters they introduce. Chapter 26 begins with an excerpt from Ash's *The Garden of Proserpina*. The poem extrapolates on the birth of language, of poetry, and of poets. Principally, it concerns itself with the naming of things. Ash describes this originary place:

The first men named this place and named the world.

They made the words for it: garden and tree

Dragon or snake and woman, grass and gold

And apples. They made names and poetry.

The things *were* what they named and made them. (P 504)

Ash refers to a time when there existed a direct correlation between language and the real, between the word and the object it represented. And myths, whether Greek or Hebraic, have served to pass this sense of origins down to us. But the word is not the thing, and these first men soon had recourse to other literary tropes: "Next/ They mixed the names and made metaphor/ Or truth, or visible truth, apples of gold" (P 504). We have moved progressively away from that place, Ash explains, but we expend all our efforts in an attempt to return to it. But these constant strivings, and the inevitable accretion of words, have only served to make the place more elusive, and language cannot help us to regain that place since it can only intimate its existence: "The place is there/ Is what we name it, and is not. It *is*" (P 505).

This describes precisely the struggle in which Roland finds himself engaged in Chapter 26. His renewed interest in individual words, pure words that have not been tainted by criticism or theory, leads him to a reevaluation of his relationship with the poet Ash. Roland is able to distance himself from Ash; in other words, to dispossess himself from the ancestor who controlled his every thought and action. Gazing at two portraits of Ash, he recognizes that he "had once seen them as parts of himself" (P 507). This relates directly to Byatt's

account of her encounter with a Coleridge scholar as an inspiration, in fact, for writing the novel. Byatt remembers thinking that this particular scholar "can't have thought a thought for the last thirty years that isn't in some sense *his* thought, and then I thought, everything I know about his thought has been put together for me by her. And I thought, you could write a wonderful novel called *Possession* about the relationship between a dead poet and a living scholar, who really, as it were, was in possession or was possessed" (*Interview* 78-9). This would no doubt apply most clearly to James Blackadder or Beatrice Nest who have had their lives overrun by their subjects. But this observation could also refer, in varying degrees, to all the scholars in the novel since the scholars are dependent upon the existence of writers after all.⁹ Roland recognizes what he had in common with Cropper – that they were both *hunters* – but now is able to see that the past did not exist for his benefit as Cropper believes, but rather for the participants in the drama: "Ash had not written the letters for Roland or for anyone else but Christabel LaMotte" (*P* 510).

But Roland's change is directly linked to his relationship with Ash. His awareness of what Ash is communicating to him, as a *reader*, prompts his transformation. The text makes it clear that such a metamorphosis can only occur with an acknowledgment of one's links to the past: "What Ash said to him – not to him specifically, there was no privileged communication, though it was he who happened to be there, at that moment, to understand it – was that the lists were the important thing, the words that named things, the language of

poetry" (P 513). The message is clear, Roland should have been writing poetry all along, not writing *about* poetry. Glancing at Ash's death mask, Roland once more considers his "relationship" with the poet: "He thought about the death mask. He could and could not say that the mask and the man were dead. What had happened to him was that the ways in which it *could* be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not" (P 513).

With the removal of the ancestral guardian Roland's emergence from his basement apartment into the once-restricted garden indicates a rebirth, the completion of the transformation. Various circumstances have led to the awakening of Roland's poetic spirit. Words manifest themselves as poems, and Roland recognizes for the first time that his mind, and not Ash's, is doing the organizing: "He had time to feel the strangeness of before and after; an hour ago there had been no poems, and now they came like rain and were real" (P 516). Nevertheless, Roland uses Ash, and all his Victorianisms, as a role model. Ash's example has made Roland aware of his own constricted existence; he now opens himself up to the world in ways previously unavailable to him. In the same way that a definitive link is finally established between Maud and the past, her own past, so Roland feels a closer connection with Ash through his budding poetic spirit. Though this will be addressed in greater detail later in the chapter, it is important to notice that Roland's ability as a reader allows him both to understand the past and to recreate his present.

Possession asserts repeatedly that we have much to learn from the Victorians, and our feelings of superiority in the wake of Lytton Strachey's demolition work can only serve to cut us off from this potential knowledge. Those who recognize what has been lost, and what might be regained through an appreciation of Victorian tenets, have the most to gain. Maud and Roland are much like Frederica Potter in *Babel Tower*:

an intellectual, driven by curiosity, by a pleasure in coherence, by making connections . . . an intellectual at large in a world where most intellectuals are proclaiming the death of coherence, the illusory nature of orders, which are perceived to be man-made, provisional and unstable" (*Babel* 380).

That Byatt considers herself one amongst this group is made clear by any number of comments she has made on the present condition of academic life. As we shall see this pursuit of coherence and connections is the desire that spurs on the protagonists in *Possession*, a desire that has a great deal more to do with the Victorian world than our own. The novel testifies to the possibility of order and coherence in the modern world, one entirely dependent upon Victorian conventions and constructions.

Rescuing the Past

Byatt demonstrates a yearning to recapture what she perceives as the vitality and contingent assuredness of the Victorian period, and if not of the period itself,

then at least of a continuum she perceives as threatened. In her essays, she often points to what she sees as misreadings and misappropriations of the Victorians. Interestingly, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, surely an inspiration for Byatt's novel, is a frequent target of her anger. Byatt adamantly wishes to counter any feelings of superiority we may feel over our Victorian ancestors. For example, she rejects a notion put forth by Sally Shuttleworth that writers of the "retro-Victorian" novel are compelled by "a kind of nostalgic desire for crisis, for the drama of loss of faith." Her own intentions, she points out, "were more to do with rescuing the complicated Victorian thinkers from modern diminishing parodies like those of Fowles and Lytton Strachey, and from the disparaging mockery (especially of the poets) of Leavis and T. S. Eliot" (*Passions* 78-79). A self-declared mission of "rescuing" her literary ancestors echoes throughout both Byatt's critical and literary texts.¹⁰

To effect her rescue and combat this parodic approach, Byatt in essence turns the tables on the present day. She constructs a past in every way superior to the present. She also juxtaposes the two periods, implying that our assumptions about our ancestors are based on insufficient knowledge and faulty conclusions. Her recuperation of the past entails a reconsideration of Victorian philosophy at the expense of present-day poststructuralism. I agree with Dana Shiller who argues that "neo-Victorian fiction is motivated by an essentially revisionist impulse to reconstruct the past by questioning the certitude of our historical knowledge" (541). *Possession* develops this idea as it presents a number of flawed

approaches to the past, as well as the recognition that such endeavors will, by their very natures, remain incomplete. Our superior attitudes towards the past, the text contends, are often founded on misconceptions and therefore need to be reevaluated.

The Victorian period appears more stable and solid than its modern counterpart for a number of reasons. First, Byatt's Victorian characters are capable of expressing their thoughts and feelings unrestricted by postmodern doubt. Postmodern critiques of the Victorians are largely dependent upon effecting a "breakage," to use de Certeau's term, which allows us to examine an object as though it existed in complete isolation from ourselves. Such a stance tends to eliminate any consideration of the commonalities we may share with the object of study, and it is precisely this attitude that Byatt seeks to reverse in her neo-Victorian fiction. Second, Byatt creates a textual world that corroborates itself. The various paratexts – letters, poems, journal entries – often serve to create connections between themselves. The interplay of Victorian texts creates the sense of a world more coherently connected and less fragmented than our own. Third, the Victorians espouse ideas that seem closer to the author's heart, ideas treated with a great deal more empathy and sympathy than those spouted by their modern counterparts. Byatt's own "romance" with the nineteenth century might be seen as an attempt to recreate a period in which some stability was maintained through Stephen Greenblatt's "circulation of social energy" exhibited in the very intertextual quality of Byatt's novels. Much of her work

thus stands as a warning against feelings of superiority fostered by postmodern sensibilities and the mere fact of sequentiality.¹¹

Byatt's privileging of the Victorians is also an act committed partially out of self-interest. Much of her writing makes it apparent that she considers herself to have a great deal more in common with her Victorian predecessors than her contemporaries. Her anxiety that the Victorians have been misappropriated and misread leads her to fear a possible extinction of any links between that past and her present. Her emphasis on the past becomes a matter of literary self-preservation as she seeks to solidify the links that bind her to Robert Browning, George Eliot, and others.

Byatt is clearly troubled by what she perceives as a distinct shift in priorities. She frequently highlights the "secondary" nature of criticism and theory that are dependent upon "a body of primary texts that are the object of critical study" (*On Histories* 99). And she bemoans the blurring of boundaries that separate the two forms of writing brought about by an increasing use of "imaginative license" on the part of critics. Such a shift in perspective, combined with the emphasis placed on the role of the reader in the construction of meaning, has led to a diminishment of the authority of the writer. Byatt aims to remedy this situation. She stipulates that since the past is largely textual any imaginative re-readings of past texts are best handled by novelists and poets: "This is a kind of rewriting, or writing between the lines which fiction does with more tact, less whimsy and infinitely more power" (*On Histories* 100). She points to authors such as Toni

Morrison and Caryl Phillips who capture the past through their fictive imaginings, something to which critical writing can never hope to aspire.

It is therefore not surprising to find the scholars of *Possession* placed at an aesthetic disadvantage. The language used by the Victorian poets allows them both to feel and express their emotional experiences in ways unavailable to the critics who study them. In an interview conducted with Byatt in October 1991, Eleanor Wachtel observed that "the Victorian poets are more engaged with life than are the modern scholars, who seem a little anaemic at times." Byatt responded that this "is part of the whole joke of the novel: the dead are actually much more alive and vital than the living. One reason for this is that the living are possessed by a particularly modern literary theory" (*Interview* 82). Byatt thus stresses that we are somehow the poorer due to limitations we have imposed upon ourselves through our theoretical pursuits.

The challenge becomes finding some way to live with the knowledge and concepts we have acquired. If Roland and Maud belong to a "theoretically knowing generation," what can they do to become *unknowing*? Is it possible to unknow something? How can they free themselves from the theoretical binds within which they find themselves entrapped? In the light of Roland's transformation, it would appear that Byatt believes they can. Roland dispossesses himself of Ash, sheds his own theoretical propensities, and appears to find a relationship with words that predates the linguistic turn. As a poet rather than a critic, Roland brings himself closer to true language. This

proximity will allow him to gain a clearer understanding of both the past and his present.

So, we can perceive Byatt's text as not merely a rescuing, but also a privileging of a particular past. It may not be nostalgia, but it is a definite yearning to maintain or reestablish values of the Victorian period. Byatt cannot hide her conviction that the Victorians lead better lives, if for no other reason than they were not crippled by an excess of self-analysis and consequent self-doubt. In contrast to the contemporary characters, Byatt notes, the Victorians "were quite sure they were real people. They didn't have modern theories of there being no concrete personality, of everybody being just a kind of mixture of moments in time and voices of the language speaking through them; they really believed they were important people and that what they did mattered in the eyes of God and in their own lives" (*Interview* 82-3). Byatt is both inspired and entranced by what she perceives to be the certitude exhibited by her predecessors as they move through life; there is an (un)disclosed yearning for a return to this surer life that finds expression in the desires of her modern-day protagonists. Thus, it is not too great of an imaginative leap to correlate the postmodern expressions of anxiety and inadequacy voiced by her characters with Byatt's own. The quandaries faced by Roland, Maud, and the others are no less than a working-out of the difficulties encountered by someone living with Victorian values in a postmodern world:

The poor moderns are always asking themselves so many questions about whether their actions are real and whether what they say can be thought to be true, given that language always tells lies, that they become rather papery and miserably aware of this, and this is part of the comedy. Of course, they then become possessed by the passion of the Victorians. (*Interview* 83)

The "of course" in the final sentence is revealing, since it presumes that the lives of the Victorians are more interesting and intriguing than those of their modern-day counterparts. Therefore, though some critics have seen Byatt's postmodernist approach to the past as ironic, there is a very real sense that the modern scholars come up short in contrast to their objects of interest.

Maud and Roland's awareness of their cultural and personal shortcomings is aroused through historical contrast with their subjects for they see themselves as incomplete in the face of their growing knowledge of the past, and of LaMotte and Ash in particular. A significant scene relatively early in the novel indicates the extent to which the modern scholars are indeed possessed, if not paralyzed, by what their documentary discoveries tell them about themselves. Having spent the day reading the discovered correspondence of Ash and LaMotte, Roland and Maud separately consider what it all means. The narrator notes that "Maud had not found Christabel an easy companion all day. She responded to threats with increasing organisation. Pin, categorise, learn" (P 150). One wonders what precisely are these "threats" to which Maud is responding. Is her

life somehow destabilized or disorganized, in the light of Christabel's? The contrast with the Victorians causes the scholars to feel diminished, but it also sets them on their way to establishing some commonality with their ancestors. Maud is made uncomfortable in the presence of Christabel because it highlights her own limitations. As we shall see, Byatt sets up a number of correspondences to indicate the extent to which we are much like the Victorians, but also the degree to which we are dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants.

In regards to Roland's transformation into poet, this uneasy relationship with the past provides the impetus for the scholars to become more like their subjects. What begins as a quest limited by scholarly detachment becomes one impelled by a search for identity through identification. As Maud drives away from the Bailey house, she quietly imagines Christabel riding on these same roads. As her ruminations continue, she begins to feel progressively insubstantial: "This thickened forest, her own humming metal car, her prying curiosity about whatever had been Christabel's life, seemed suddenly to be the ghostly things, feeding on, living through, the young vitality of the past" (P 150-1). What the text achieves here is an ironic reversal; it is not the dead Christabel but the living Maud who is presented as groundless. Confronted with "the young vitality of the past," Maud feels herself to be ghostly and amorphous. The narrator observes that "Maud was inside, and the outside was alive and separate" (P 151). What feels like a quest for simplicity, for that "clean white bed," is in effect a yearning for some passionate, meaningful experience that will help to bring her

life alive. The example of Ash and LaMotte awakens that yearning in Roland and Maud as they perceive the extent to which their lives have been impoverished by fruitless and nihilistic postmodern pursuits.

The juxtaposition of the two plots, Victorian and modern, highlights the degree to which our modern concerns have not significantly changed from those expressed by Ash and LaMotte. At the same time, the text reveals the essential similarity between our *fin de siècle* anxieties and those of our Victorian predecessors. Fundamental differences exist primarily on the level of language and terminology. The words used by the Victorians allow them more direct access to their inner experiences and thus cope more effectively with their anxieties. While Byatt may be intent on rescuing the past, however, she does not put forth a naïve and blindly nostalgic representation of it. She sees the limitations of the Victorian world-view and addresses some of the instability of the period, pointing to the increased interest in spiritualism, for example, as an instance of lost souls looking for some solid ground.¹²

With the goal of establishing a general pattern of similarity, Byatt sets up a number of correspondences between the Victorian plot and its modern counterpart. These correspondences are numerous and play different roles in the novel.¹³ The text communicates a sense of history repeating itself, particularly through the contemporary characters mirroring the actions and personalities of their Victorian counterparts. Byatt has created so many connections between the past and the present that at times the reader is likely to feel overwhelmed. The

novel's cross-references serve to blur the boundaries between past and present. These connections are so frequent that the reader is likely to forget when, and to whom, certain references were initially made. At one point, for example, Maud purchases a brooch for Leonora Stern that resembles exactly the one bought by Christabel for Blanche. Since Leonora makes a pass at Maud, this may or may not help to clarify whether the Victorian women actually had a lesbian relationship. Beatrice Nest is a woman who shares a great deal with her subject, Ellen Ash, including a particular philosophy about the preservation of the past's secrets. Both would prefer that the past be left alone and not raked over by "ghouls," and both exhibit a rather protective attitude towards their subjects. The status of women, both in Victorian times and in present academic circles, is a theme that also ties the two plots together. Within a few pages both Val, Roland's present girlfriend, and Blanche Glover, Christabel's "partner," refer to themselves as "superfluous" people (*P* 236, 238). And Fergus Wolff threatens Maud's solitude in much the same way that Ash does Christabel's (*P* 152). These connections serve to solidify the thematic link between the two historical periods.

But it is between the budding relationship of Roland and Maud and the affair of Ash and LaMotte that the strongest connections are made. The empathy that the two scholars feel for their subjects ultimately leads to an abandoning of postmodern perspectives and a more humanist approach to the past. Maud and Roland clearly share a great deal with LaMotte and Ash, and this ultimately

allows them to make the imaginative leaps in their reconstruction of the past lives. At one point, for example, Roland wonders whether he and Maud are "being driven by a plot or fate that seem[s], at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others" (P 456). Or both couples are, in fact, being driven by the *same* plot that simply recurs throughout history.¹⁴

Despite what some critics have argued, this *is* a form of nostalgia, since Byatt endorses the view that the Victorians, freed from the burden of posthumanist thought, led fuller and more authentic lives. She engages in what Foucault calls "the consoling play of recognitions" (*Nietzsche* 88). She strives to create continuity, assuming some constancy in human nature that would allow her protagonists to *connect with* – and in the narrator's case, to *be* – the Victorian subjects under observation. She resolutely refuses to acknowledge that the world has changed, and that the values of the Victorian period, no matter how moral or worthy, can never be resurrected. To maintain her stance, Byatt must find a specific means of emplotting her story that will allow her to read history in a particular way. Her choice of Romance as her multivalent trope reveals much about Byatt's relationship to the literary past.

Emplotment and Byatt's Narrative Desire

Byatt's novel offers an implicit critique of the various historical approaches adopted by the characters; Cropper's the most despicable, Nest's the most pitiable, Roland and Maud's the most clear-sighted. Each of these characters is

motivated by a different urge, not all conscious, and each is rewarded according to the merit of the approach. The text also presents a judgement, however, of the purity of the desire that drives these individuals. And ultimately, this degree of purity, of disinterestedness, predicts the level of success. Byatt's enterprise is very similar to that of her characters, since she herself engages in the construction of a narrative that will give the past meaning and coherence. So what compels Byatt to write *Possession*? And does this narrative desire differ from that of her characters? Studies of desire in narrative have posited that the author's use of narrative is either a way of satisfying or of subduing a particular desire. In the ordering of her own narratives, in this case a series of fictionalized texts, Byatt demonstrates her own need to control the malleable past. For Peter Brooks, our desire to tell reflects a need to make sense of an incoherent self and existence where "telling stories becomes the only viable form of 'explanation'" (54). This concept of telling works reasonably well when the teller speaks of herself, but how can it be applied when the teller speaks of others? Are we meant to extrapolate and see that the teller is still speaking of the self rather than the other? Is there a way to read *Possession* as an address to Byatt's own literary past *and* future? These questions necessarily raise the specter of the intentional fallacy and the risk involved in attributing to the author those ideas expressed by the characters.

Though Byatt has transferred her concerns onto her characters, her interest and indeed engagement with the question of the Victorian past in her critical

writing suggests that her own desires may be a relevant topic in any study of her novel. The question of possessing the past, and the viability of such a project is of course central to *Possession*. Her title exposes simultaneously the desires of modern-day academe and her own yearnings. All of the characters exhibit significant shortcomings in their respective needs to possess knowledge of the past. And though Byatt seems to acknowledge the limitations of such pursuits, her metalinguistic positioning gives her a distinct epistemological advantage. The Postscript to the novel reveals the extent of her knowledge, one that goes far beyond the purview of any of her characters. We are thus made aware, as is Byatt, that no matter how much inadequacy the narrator may wish to profess, the author still manifests a great deal of control.

Plotting is a means of exercising power. In psychoanalytic terms, Brooks points out that the desire is to construct a narrative "reproductive of the past yet accessible to the interventions of the present" (234). We might suggest here that desire works on the narrative, propelling events forward toward some end, but that narrative also works on desire, subduing and making it bearable.¹⁵ So while Byatt scorns the theoretical quandaries of her modern protagonists, she stands guilty of the same desire. *Possession* demonstrates her exercising control over the past, a control that is the privilege of the writer, but not the critic. Byatt's juxtaposed plots allow for the maintenance of her narrative desire, for although we can never know *everything*, she concedes, there is always the possibility that we can know *more*. In this light, Mortimer Cropper's relic-

hunting is simply an exaggerated striving for what we all want – the whole tangible, graspable story. Byatt's self-consciousness and her awareness of the illusory nature of history do not prevent her from composing histories that insistently subvert prevailing doctrines.¹⁶

Plotting becomes the very means by which the past can be controlled, both by author and characters. And the extent to which one can create a plausible narrative indicates the degree of one's power. This power is naturally amplified if the constructed past can be made to confirm one's present. To mold the past into a malleable entity that can be made to do one's bidding is a motivation shared by the scholar-detectives in Byatt's novel. In order to control the past, however, *Possession* makes clear it is necessary to possess the requisite knowledge and to use that knowledge in the proper way. The characters, both past and present, are driven by various desires, most of which are directly linked to the acquisition of knowledge. As Byatt's poet Randolph Henry Ash proclaims, "to be human is to desire to know what may be known at any means" (P 218). But can these desires simply be reduced to *a need to know*? If so, one wonders why this knowledge is so desired and what it provides to the desirer. The hope, it seems, is that some desire will be quenched at the end of the narrative, that some form of knowledge, inaccessible and thus unacquired before the telling of the narrative, will suddenly be made available to the listener, the teller, or both. In the first half of the novel, Byatt emphasizes the imbalance of true desire between the figures of the past who undeniably desire each other, compelled by

"necessity" as Christabel exclaims, and the modern characters who merely yearn to know about figures of the past and live vicariously through them. What finally drives Maud and Roland to uncover the Ash-LaMotte story, other than simple academic interest, is the prospect that somehow they will learn something about themselves. They both have an inkling that much more is to be gained, that some meaning yet undisclosed will be brought to light. The connection they feel with their subjects only strengthens their conviction that such knowledge will have some immediate significance to them. Roland initially believes that this knowledge will give him a greater understanding of Ash, but what he does not know is that it will give him a greater understanding of himself, as it will Maud, more explicitly, with the discovery of her ancestry.

Roland's first "shock of excitement" comes from the anticipation that he will know something that was never known before (P 5). Initially, he has acquired access to some of Ash's marginalia in a text by Vico that has long gone undisturbed. Eventually, his interest will shift with the discovery of two unfinished drafts of letters written by Ash to a mystery woman. At this point, Roland's excitement can be directly attributed to a sense of connecting with the past, bringing pages to light that have long been covered: "the dead leaves continued a kind of rustling and shifting, enlivened by their release. Ash had put them there" (P 5). On occasions such as this the scholars will feel that the gap separating them from the past has been bridged and that their insights in those moments hold a certain degree of truth. But Byatt simultaneously outlines the

contradictory and paradoxical nature of epistemological desire. Roland recognizes in these early stirrings the "tiresome and bewitching endlessness of the quest for knowledge" (P 7). Incompleteness is part of the brutal reality of any project undertaken, as we shall see, and yet this does not prevent the various scholars from plunging ahead. References to Lacan are sprinkled throughout *Possession*. And Lacanians, of course, would argue that the fulfillment of desire is an unattainable goal and that any satisfaction we do derive issues from a substitute or surrogate of the originary object, not the desired thing itself.

In the early stages of the novel, the interest Roland and Maud exhibit for their subjects does not differ significantly from that of their academic colleagues. Tied to the idea of knowledge, of course, is the whole sense of one's identity, particularly if one is an academic. On a very basic level, new information provides these academics with both justification for their career choices and the possibility of future employment.¹⁷ Roland sees that part of his excitement stems from "possessing his knowledge on his own" (P 7), and this idea will contribute to much of the suspense in the novel itself. The thrill comes from observing Roland and Maud hoarding their findings and trying to stay one step ahead of their academic rivals. The challenge for all the scholars is to gather as quickly as possible the necessary pieces of information in order to construct a coherent plot that suitably accounts for the new discoveries. But the text demonstrates that emplotting is in many ways self-fashioning; the stories these scholars formulate reveal as much about the subject as they do about the object.

In *Possession*, the relative success of the historiographic operation depends heavily upon finding the proper balance between self and object. Byatt shows that Cropper and Nest, and to some degree Blackadder, have had their identities entirely subsumed by their respective object of study.

The "hunter" Mortimer Cropper is interested in retrieving as many artifacts as he can in the hopes of reconstructing the past in its entirety. At one point, he explains to a prospective seller of some of Ash's letters:

It is my aim to know as far as possible everything he did – everyone who mattered to him – every little preoccupation he had. These small letters of yours, Mrs Wapshott, are not much maybe, on their own. But in the global perspective they add lustre, they add detail, they bring the whole man just that little bit more back to life. (P 108)

Such devotion, of course, leads to loss of the self and Cropper himself fears that he has "no separate existence of his own" (P 118).

James Blackadder, as editor of the Complete Works, recognizes that the reconstruction of a physical past is an impossibility and concedes that the best he can do is create a textual representation. His problem, however, is much like Cropper's in that he never completes his project because it can always be *more* complete. For a quarter of a century he has been annotating, with the help of numerous graduate students, Ash's *Complete Poems and Plays*. The project continues because there is always one more entry to be added: "The footnotes

engulfed and swallowed the text. They were ugly and ungainly, but necessary, Blackadder thought, as they sprang up like the heads of the Hydra, two to solve in the place of one solved" (P 33). Like Cropper, he believes in an eventual reproduction of the past and that his footnotes *will* recreate the world in which Randolph Henry Ash wrote his poems.

For entirely different reasons, Beatrice Nest has spent her entire academic life on one project, an edition of Ellen Ash's journal. But, as a woman in academe during the 1950s, she saw her path blocked and her opportunities limited. She also desires to protect the past from the present, to prevent "scavengers" such as Cropper from digging up the private remains and secrets of those who can no longer defend themselves. Like her counterparts, however, she is swallowed up by her subject. She senses "the mystery of privacy, which Ellen, for all her expansive ordinary eloquence, was protecting" and she endeavors to do the same (P 129). As such, it is difficult for the reader to discern where Ellen Ash ends and Beatrice Nest begins.

While Nest's approach is meek and silent, Leonora Stern's is brash and loud, much like her personality. It may not be an accident that Byatt has made the two most aggressive characters in the novel, Cropper and Stern, American. Leonora has committed her career to situating Christabel LaMotte's work in a feminist/lesbian context. This intellectual investment causes her to focus exclusively on those aspects of LaMotte's writing, thus blinding her to other possible interpretations of her text. Some of Byatt's sharpest satire comes at the

expense of Leonora, whose obsessions with things sexual permanently colors her reading of the past.¹⁸

Most notable is the gender difference in regards to the acquisition of knowledge. The male characters exhibit a much more acquisitive and proprietary approach to historical documents. Blackadder and Cropper spend a good deal of their time squabbling over the ownership of various relics. In direct contrast, the female scholars demonstrate a willingness to share whatever information they may have gathered. Both Nest and Stern show themselves willing to share their findings, and the latter makes a concerted effort to collaborate with Maud. It is Leonora's discovery of Sabine de Kercoz's journal that provides vital clues in the solving of the mystery. She willingly tells Maud of this find and wishes to work with someone she perceives to be a kindred spirit. And while one may criticize Maud's preemptive reading of the journal, the text makes it clear that the women do not see themselves as having exclusive rights to any of the knowledge they uncover.

While the text rewards the collaborative spirit, a fundamental component of Roland and Maud's quest, it also underlines the inevitable limitations of the historiographic project. The researchers remain trapped in their present situations and never completely certain of the accuracy of their interpretations. Though the various characters are aware that their texts may be nothing more than "fictive approximations,"¹⁹ they each nevertheless harbor the conviction that their reconstruction contains a kernel of truth. The strength of one's

conviction, however, does not guarantee the historical truth of one's reconstruction. As we shall see in the next section, Byatt circumvents this dilemma by simply removing any ambiguity through authorial interference. She provides her readers with the information necessary to evaluate the plausibility of each historical reconstruction. In fact, our need to evaluate is curtailed since Byatt more or less tells us that the story pieced together by Roland and Maud is *the right one*, with the exception of a detail or two. What is significant for Byatt, as Shiller has pointed out, is not so much the truth as the process adopted to attain that truth.²⁰

What eventually distinguishes Roland and Maud's quest from that of their colleagues is a perception of the past as a living thing, something that still breathes in today's world. Roland's explanation to Maud for taking the letters from the Library is that they "were alive." We shall touch on the question of resurrection in a later section, but suffice to say at the moment that while the past is truly dead for Cropper *et al*, it is truly living for the modern lovers. This difference permits them to crack the mystery, because though Byatt displays an awareness of the ways history can be transmuted by subjectivity and relativism, she also makes it clear that the past existed and *can be* communicated if properly read. As Janik argues, the novel makes a distinction between those "who seek to possess" and those "who can allow themselves to *be* possessed" (163-4). Unlike the other scholars who work in isolation - Blackadder and Stern only get together late in the chase - Roland and Maud search together, combining their

diverse expertise and different points of view. The novel endorses this kind of collaborative exercise and the possible fruits it may bear.²¹

But they initially approach the past with self-consciousness and scholarly detachment. Chapters 12 through 14 describe the slow changes that overtake them. Roland and Maud may be "theoretically *knowing*," but they are not *feeling*, as the narrator makes clear. Both researchers remain uncomfortable with the human side of this story, revealing their ambivalence in a visit to Bethany, the restored home of LaMotte and Blanche Glover. They maintain their distance by seeing Bethany as a "simulacrum" and a "postmodern quotation" (P 230). At first, they are too conscious of being critics; their identities are too invested in maintaining their academic stances. Such a position allows them to view the past ironically and with a certain degree of condescension. Naturally, such thinking inhibits the empathy with the subject that is necessary in any historical construction.

To highlight this deficiency, Byatt interrupts their musings with a curious paragraph that foreshadows the omniscient voice of Chapter 15:

Out of here she had come, stepping rapidly, in a swirl of determined black skirts, lips tight with determination, hands compressed on her reticule, eyes wide with fear, with hope, wild, how? (P 230)

It is not clear to whom these thoughts about Christabel belong. But there is a sense here of fictive approximation, as though detachment is momentarily

dropped and one feels the past as it was truly lived, as something other. This train of thought, however, is quickly replaced by Roland, who gives voice to his postmodern stance:

"I've never been much interested in places - or things - with associations -"

"Nor I. I'm a textual scholar. I rather deplore the modern feminist attitude to private lives."

"If you're going to be stringently analytical," Roland said, "don't you have to?"

"You can be psychoanalytic without being *personal* -" Maud said.

Roland did not challenge her. It was he who had suggested they come to Richmond to discuss what to do next, and now they were here, the sight of the house was indeed disturbing. (P 230)

Typically with Byatt, we are not told why Roland should feel "disturbed," but the implication is that the house is too real, not textual enough, for scholars who prefer to construct the past solely from documents. But Roland and Maud do not find themselves able to maintain their imaginative positioning as they become increasingly invested in discovering the narrative they are constructing from textual traces. Increasingly, they try to put themselves in the place of their subjects. As Roland says, "It makes an interesting effort of imagination to think how [Ash and LaMotte] saw the world" (P 276). Their empathy for their subjects grows, and ironically, this structure of feeling finally allows them to

acknowledge their similarities – their mutual need for that clean white bed – and their own passions for one another.²²

As the two begin to make textual connections in the poems of Victorians, their scholarly interest begins to metamorphose into true engagement. At one point, Maud, perhaps frightened by her newfound enthusiasm, suggests to Roland that they should tell the others and "marshal [their] resources." Roland asks her if this is what she truly wants to do:

"No, I want to – to – follow the – path. I feel taken over by this. I want to *know* what happened, and I want it to be me that finds out. I thought you were mad, when you came to Lincoln with your stolen letter. Now I feel the same. It isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive."

"Narrative curiosity – " (P 258-9)

While their language remains somewhat vague and abstract, the scholars are being propelled by some form of desire. Maud is now equally possessed by the quest, and they are both consumed by the need to string this story together, to construct a plausible plot, for themselves. Roland calls it "narrative curiosity," but Maud contends that this only accounts for part of her interest. It is *more* than curiosity. It is the need to acquire some form of knowledge, as Byatt's italicizing of the word "know" makes clear. But it is still more than this. Maud shows some insight into the power of this desire when she labels it as "primitive." Our appetite for stories may go beyond anything we can rationally explain. Nor is it

one that is easily controlled. Later, when Roland and she sneak off to France and acquire Sabine de Kercoz's journal, Maud's "curiosity and narrative greed" override her feelings of feminist cooperation and consideration for Leonora (P 363).

Roland, of course, should understand Maud's condition since earlier in the novel the narrator notes that he "felt as though he was prying, and as though he was being uselessly urged on by some violent emotion of curiosity - not greed, curiosity, more fundamental even than sex, the desire for knowledge" (P 92). The characters (and one might say Byatt herself) struggle to find the words to describe accurately their experience. The relationship between narrative and desire is both complicated and complex. Narrative may help to contain desire, but it spurs it on at the same time. The greed for knowledge stems from a need for confirmation and certainty, two elements that invest one with power (over those who do not know what one knows) and eradicate one's anxieties (about knowing what one knows). The obverse of desire is anxiety: we desire something because we are anxious about not having it. And the construction of a narrative implies possession. Maud wants it to be she that finds out, because the knowledge will be her possession. Roland and Maud may be "theoretically knowing," but they are not knowing, at least initially, in ways that really matter. They do not know about themselves. Ironically, through an understanding of Ash and LaMotte they will come to know themselves and will attain self-possession. Thus, our desire for narrative is, in some sense, a desire to

understand our own desire and a means of giving our desire significance. Plots play on our need to make sense of things, often by containing an implied promise that sufficient information will be provided to allow us to extract some meaning from it. Narrative will allow us both to understand our desire and to control it.

Working like detectives, Roland and Maud construct a plot that answers their questions, relieves their uncertainties, and accords with their own conceptions of the past. They assemble textual clues as they form a narrative that stretches back to the originary moment when the "crime" was committed. This thirst for knowledge is often linked directly with the act of reading. Narrative appears to promise satisfaction to the extent that it provides a suitable outlet for one's "narrative greed." Every character in the *Possession*, both modern and Victorian, is first and foremost a reader who seeks to construct a plot, like the historian or the detective, that will provide readerly satisfaction. In dealing with the past, as Brooks points out, the question is often one of placement: *how did we get here?* (6). The historian's task retraces back from the end and arrives at some origin, or choosing a determinate point in the distant past he moves forward until the present moment is reached and all makes sense. The historian strings together a number of elements, much like the detective, in order to create a coherent and plausible plot.

Maud at one point notes that "literary critics make good detectives" (P 258), and it is true that they engage in similar activities, pulling together clues to create

a plot that will incorporate in a satisfying manner events from the past, an activity to which the historian is also no stranger. In *Possession*, of course, all of the clues are textual. Buxton argues that Byatt has written "a detective story concerned with reading" (206), and Byatt herself admits that the impulse to write the novel was sparked by Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, another work of postmodern detective fiction. Of Maud and Roland, she observes:

The two researchers in fact are detectives: they are constantly searching for clues, and they get quite excited when they discover a line of poetry which gives them a clue to a whole set of ideas, or indeed to the entire behaviour of their hero . . . the scholars were actually doing the kind of detection that one really does with poems, which is finding out their meaning, the real feeling behind them, what the poet was really concentrating on. (*Interview* 81)

The scholars thus progress toward meaning, combining and supplementing the information they have in order to fill in the gaps in their narrative. And, as Byatt's statement makes clear, a certain degree of epistemological certainty can be attained through this exercise.

By the end of the novel, our own need to know has very much reached a fever pitch. Despite the negative connotations surrounding Cropper's approach, he declares what the reader feels: "It is only that box [in the grave] - whose contents we may only guess at - the thought of it decaying in the ground until such time as we acquire the legal right to exhume it - the thought of *perhaps never*

knowing - " (P 531). Cropper expresses a fear common to all readers that the plot will remain incomplete and its intricacies will not be worked out to our satisfaction. Detective fiction promises satisfaction and resolution, and Byatt does not disappoint. We may, like Beatrice Nest, condemn Cropper's ghoulish actions, but we also expect to know what is in that box in Ash's coffin. In *Possession*, Byatt creates a strong plot thread linking the past with the present. She effectuates this most obviously by establishing a bloodline between Maud and the Victorian lovers.

The novel's conclusion implies that the past can be known, and it is the perceptive reader who can make sense of it. But Byatt is too well-versed in poststructuralist thought to ignore the textual aspect of historical reconstruction. She recognizes that in order for the reader to accept her conclusions as well as the Victorian coherence of her plot construction, she will need to beg for some readerly indulgence. The novel thus begins with what Buxton aptly labels "an authorizing statement of deception" (P 207). The epigraphs from Hawthorne and Browning apply to Byatt's art as much as they do to any of the characters in the book. Having titled her novel *Possession: A Romance*, Byatt turns to Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* as a long-established justification for her own enterprise: "When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude." One immediately wonders what "latitude" Byatt will be claiming for herself and what concessions she expects the reader to make in the process of reading her novel. Hawthorne

distinguishes between the Romance and the Novel, suggesting that a greater leeway is afforded to the writer of the former who need to adhere so closely to the strictures of Reality. Hawthorne's objective in writing a Romance - "to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us" - matches perfectly with Byatt's own motivation.

The second epigraph from Browning's poem "Mr Sludge" questions the construction of any narrative and the extent to which one might challenge the veracity of one form of discourse over another:

'How did you contrive to grasp
 The thread which led you through this labyrinth?
 How build such solid fabric out of air?
 How on so slight foundation found this tale,
 Biography, narrative?' or, in other words,
 'How many lies did it require to make
 The portly truth you here present us with?'

Browning questions the supposed purity of truth and the contention that it must remain entirely untarnished by the slightest falsehood. Instead, Browning acknowledges the role of lies in creating any "portly truth." Again, one can see that this is a belief that Byatt upholds: what does it matter if the truth is bent to a good degree, if people who never existed cavort with those who did? Browning's Sludge, a medium, uses every means at his disposal to make his audience believe in the past he conjures up. It makes no difference that fiction

and fact are conflated so long as the end result is a plausible truth we are willing to believe. Since the past can never be fully known, this method is as acceptable as any other. Byatt herself acts as a type of medium between us and the Victorian past, blurring the line between fact, conjecture, and intuition. The theme of resuscitation and our relationship with the dead runs throughout *Possession* and will be addressed in greater depth later in the chapter.

I wish to address at this point Byatt's belief that fact and fiction can be combined in order to arrive at some other kind of truth. Most particularly, I want to consider the ways in which fiction can help us grasp the reality of the past by reconstituting the inner lives of its protagonists, an aspect of the past most historians would identify as unavailable to us. This false construction, however, allows us to *feel* the past as well as to *know* it. In a Preface to *Sugar*, a collection of short stories, Byatt admits that she has been concerned with the relationship between fiction and lies most of her life. She speaks of her admiration for Proust because he "could narrate what was his own life, *beside* his life, more truthfully and more exactly than any autobiographer, biographer or historian, because what he wrote contained its own precise study of the nature of language, of perception, of memory, of what limits and constitutes our vision of things" (*Passions* 16). Byatt privileges the novelist's ability to incorporate a wide range of disparate elements into a coherent whole. Unencumbered by the restrictions placed on the historian, the novelist arrives at truth through his art.

Byatt finds these same qualities in Robert Browning, and indeed she appears to share much the same philosophical attitudes. She praises Browning's dramatic monologues and disputes the criticism that his characters are "Victorians in disguise." She sees these poems rather as recreations of the past that offer us considerable knowledge of human history. Byatt observes, though, that Browning's poems address "the problems which centrally occupied the nineteenth-century mind: the problems of the relation of time to history, of science to religion, of fact in science or history to fiction, or lies, in both, and of art to all of these" (*Passions* 22). She sees the monologues as fulfilling a double function: they can speak simultaneously, with some authority, on the past *and* the present. Browning's texts speak unavoidably of his present, but more significant for Byatt is his reconstruction of the past through an imaginative fictionalizing of past voices. She most admires Browning's ability to create a hybrid, a kind of "fictional truth," an entity with an existence of its own, but no less significant for that: "Fiction that makes fact alive is a kind of truth, to set beside human untruth, and the undifferentiated Divine Word-Truth" (*Passions* 42).

Thus, it is not surprising to find Browning as a central figure in one of the stories collected in *Sugar*. "Precipice-Encurled" also begins with an epigraph from Browning:

What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?

Is fiction, which makes fact alive, fact too?

The somehow may be thishow.²³

Byatt too blurs the line between fact and fiction as a means of examining our condescending and superior attitudes towards the Victorian past. The story is presented from four different perspectives, though always through the guiding consciousness of an omniscient narrator. Culled from a footnote, the story tells of a scheduled visit of Robert Browning to Mrs. Bronson in Venice. This visit, however, is canceled due to the unfortunate death of a young man, Joshua Riddell, at another location Browning and his sister are meant to visit. The story is made up of facts, fiction, and what might be termed "invented facts." Byatt's wilful playing with the facts discloses her belief that the truth can be revealed in unconventional ways, that it can be sensed and felt rather than simply known.

The story is divided into four sections of widely varying length. In the second section, the narrator introduces a modern scholar who is in the process of writing the story of Browning and Mrs. Bronson, a woman with whom Browning may have carried on a romantic liaison during the last decade of his life.²⁴ The section opens with the scholar thinking, "Dear dead women," revealing his somewhat patronizing attitude to his subject (*Sugar* 187). The narrator highlights the distance standing between the scholar and the subject by pointing to the tools he must use (microfilm, browned notes) and the numerous places he must visit (Kansas, Cambridge, Oxford) in his attempts to reconstruct the past. In an attempt to spur his imagination, he stands on what he believes is the same spot in Venice where he believes Mrs. Bronson stood with Browning in 1889.

Through his efforts, the scholar feels he "knows" Mrs. Bronson because he has "resuscitated" her in the same manner that Browning has done with his speakers in his dramatic monologues.

But the scholar willfully refuses to engage in any fiction-making; he thinks that a "good scholar may permissibly invent, he may have a hypothesis, but fiction is barred" (*Sugar* 187-88). Despite his own conscious comparison with Browning, he remains blind to the ways in which fiction contributes to his recreation. He reveals his own belief that the past can be made transparent and does not take into account how his language, and the particular narrative he wishes to tell, both affect his ability to remove himself from the story and provide an objective representation of the facts. For example, his reconstruction takes on a romantic tone as he imagines a possible attraction between his fifty-four year old heroine and the seventy-seven year-old Browning: "The scholar's story combs the facts this way. They have a subtle, not too dramatic shape, lifelike in that" (*Sugar* 188). These sentences suggest that his narrative might be "combed" another way, that another trope might be used, and that the scholar's approach colors his rendering of the past. There is an implication on the part of the narrator, however, that the scholar's unconscious fictionalizing has nonetheless permitted him to create "characters" who may bear some similarity to their real-life counterparts. While Byatt remains aware of the effects that the linguistic turn has had on history, she remains convinced that some element of the historical truth can be retrieved, particularly if the facts are allowed to be

transmuted by fiction. Kathleen Kelly suggests that "the categories of fiction (Byatt's story) and fact (the particulars of Robert Browning's and Mrs. Bronson's lives) are thus intermixed, effectively destabilizing both" (Kelly's parentheses 43). But I would argue that destabilization is not part of Byatt's aesthetic project. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Byatt uses these two categories to shore each other up so that in her conception, fiction is strengthened by the facts and the facts are illuminated by the fiction.

Noting that Browning returned to London, the narrator ends the section with a curious sentence: "He was in danger of allowing the friendship to cool, the scholar writes, perhaps anxious on her behalf, perhaps on the poet's, perhaps on his own" (*Sugar* 188). The text highlights the scholar's own investment in the events of the past. Naturally, the incident was in some way significant to the participants, but they are also crucial to the scholar's narrative who needs events to unfold in a particular way in order to confirm the line his narrative has followed up to this point. This idea resurfaces in *Possession*, particularly in the figure of Cropper, as the scholars feel the past somehow unfolded for their benefit. The scholar of "Precipice-Encurled" can be seen as an early composite of the modern-day scholars in *Possession*. While he exhibits some of their mistaken assumptions and an over-investment in the past, he also writes a fictionalized/factualized narrative that allows him to glimpse some partial truths about the relationship between Browning and Mrs. Bronson. In *Possession*, historical approaches are more clearly dichotomized and elaborated. This story,

however, is an early indication of Byatt's belief that the past can be recaptured through an imaginative symbiosis of fact and fiction. For while the themes she accentuates may be those of incompleteness and mystery, such is not the overall effect of the story itself. And though the plot of "Precipice-Encurled" may be one of missed possibilities, the reader will hardly identify it as one of irresolution. The pieces fall into place, and the reader finishes the story feeling that Byatt's recreation of the event, despite its literary misinformation, is as plausible as any factual account.

Byatt employs this same rhetorical strategy in *Possession*. And although the historical enterprise is entirely fictionalized, one might speculate on the applicability of such an approach to real life. Like her modern-day scholars, she recognizes the paradox of postmodern existence that we know the truth is irretrievable but we seek it nonetheless:

whilst it was once attractive (*séduisant?*) to think that whatever we say or see is our own construction, it now becomes necessary to reconsider the idea of truth, hard truth, and its possibility. We may be, as Browning said, born liars. But the idea itself is only wholly meaningful if we glimpse a possibility of truth and truthfulness for which we must strive, however, inevitably, partial our success must be. (*Passions* 17)

Here Byatt highlights the conflicting desires and tensions that are products of being postmodern, of being "theoretically knowing." The quotation makes clear,

however, which of the two desires she privileges. Byatt's conscious emplotment of *Possession* as a Romance indicates precisely what type of history she wishes to tell, and this is further corroborated by the use of the Hawthorne epigraph. But other than pleading for readerly indulgence, she chooses Romance as her particular mode of emplotment because of specific qualities of the genre to which she and her readers are attracted. She seeks a plot that will allow her to juxtapose these desires, accentuating the purity of the passions of her Victorians while deprecating the second-hand versions of her modern-day scholars. Byatt is also attracted to the idea of a satisfactory ending, something distinctly *unpostmodern* but central to any definition of the Romance. She chooses Romance as her mode of emplotment also because it affords her the flexibility to "present th[e] truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation" (Hawthorne's words), and because it allows her to paint a particular portrait of the Victorian period.

Dealing with the historical past necessarily raises certain anxieties, as we have noted, and the mode of emplotment reveals the specific means by which the writer seeks to appease these anxieties. Byatt chooses the romantic mode of emplotment precisely because she is inherently conscious of the limitations of historiography. The mode of emplotment signals the meaning the reader should derive from this particular synthesis of events. The kind of story Byatt wishes expressly to tell is one of successful connection with the past that allows a segment of the present to thrive. While some critics have claimed that Byatt is

not nostalgic for a nineteenth-century world, her text privileges certain values and beliefs from the past she deems worthy of preserving or recovering. Her choice of Romance allows her to present the past in a sympathetic light and to highlight the disparity in passion, in concepts of Love, between the past and the present.

Byatt's juxtaposition of plots, of course, complicates imposing any simple generic taxonomy upon her text. Byatt's novel contains an overlaying of two plots. There is the Ironic plot of the conscious scholars who are paralyzed by their own consciousness, and there is the Romantic plot of love overcoming all odds. But, and this is a significant *but*, there is also the Ironic plot of historical incompleteness and the Romantic plot of historical plenitude. In *Possession*, Byatt attempts to have her historical incompleteness and eat it too. She protests, through her characters and their necessary blindness, that the past can never be entirely known. At the same time, however, she presents a second plot, one available to her readers only, in which history is presented as a coherent and entirely comprehensible entity. Thus, both Ironic plots are subsumed by their Romantic counterparts, hence the subtitle of the novel, "A Romance." Before examining Byatt's unfashionable use of coherence and closure, however, it is important to examine the concessions she does make to the ineluctable nature of the past.

Throughout the novel in various ways Byatt signals her awareness that the very process of selection and exclusion employed by the historian necessitates

the partial nature of the historiographic project. The awareness displayed by most of the scholars, for example, that the discovery of this affair may dramatically affect all prior scholarship is one example of the tenuousness of historical knowledge. For example, Maud's mistaking the hair in Ash's watch for Christabel's (we learn that it is in fact Maia's) is an acknowledgment of the possibility of error in reconstructing the past. Byatt's occasional use of *rayure* in some of the letters also briefly opens a window on the unrestorable past (P 7, 8, 207, 544). Roland and Maud read letters in which words are scratched out but can still be read. At one point, for example, Christabel writes of Blanche's interception of Ash's poem. She strains to forgive her, but suddenly exclaims, "~~But to stoop to Theft~~" (P 207). The *rayure* reflects the writer's agitated state of mind at the moment of writing, but it also suggests what has not been written, what has not been said - the letter, like the historical text, cannot and will not say everything.

These are concessions to the inadequacies of historical reconstruction in comparison to the mysteries that surround two of the Victorian characters in Byatt's novel: Blanche Glover and Ellen Ash. In contrast to the other Victorian figures, Blanche Glover remains something of an enigma at the center of that plot. Quite literally, very little remains of Blanche. Early in the novel, for example, Roland reads about Blanche's paintings of various myths, some "large canvases in oil, none of which have survived" (P 42). These paintings are the principal example in the novel of irretrievable parts of the past. In her suicide

note, Blanche refers to twenty-seven paintings, as well as drawings and sketches. She expresses her belief in their value, though no contemporary appreciation for them has been demonstrated: "They are the best of me . . . Nothing endures for certain, but good art endures for a time, and I have wanted to be understood by those not yet born. By whom else, after all?" (*P* 334). Blanche places her faith in her canvases surviving her and finding some appreciation in the future:

I should like them to stay together, if possible, until a taste may be created and a spirit of judgment may prevail where their true worth may be assessed. But I shall, in a little time, have forfeited my right to watch over them, and they must make their own dumb and fragile way. (*P* 334)

Byatt touches on two important elements of her text in the person of Blanche Glover and the fate of her paintings. There is something pathetic in Blanche's wishes precisely because we know they have not survived (or, at least, have not been found). But Byatt also addresses the work of women that has been washed away by the tides of history and the oppression of men. Blanche's paintings, which may have been Pre-Raphaelite in form, were never given their due consideration, and may have been ahead of their time. At one point, Maud and Leonora speculate on the paintings and their whereabouts. Leonora interestingly suggests that they may be hidden away in the Bailey house, the same place Roland and Maud discovered the correspondence. While Maud considers that this is possible, she does not divulge that information, asking instead whether

Leonora thinks the paintings "were any good." Leonora admits that she "dreadfully want[s] them to have been. She had the dedication. She was sure they were good" (P 339). She also admits that her imagination falls short in conjuring up mental images of what the paintings might have looked like since they "were really original." She wants the paintings to be good but acknowledges to Maud that her reason for doing so is that Blanche "was a sister" revealing her own ideological bias in reading history (P 339).

Blanche remains a mystery, a void at the center of the novel, as Byatt intends her to be. In fact, the relationship between Blanche and Christabel is something of a question mark for the readers of *Possession*, despite the certainty displayed by Leonora Stern that what the two shared was in fact a lesbian relationship. The closest Byatt comes to including an aspect of historical irresolution is this undisclosed nature of the relationship between Christabel and Blanche. Are they lovers, or merely sisters-in-arms? Unrevealed are the specific reasons for Blanche's suicide, any direct discussion of their relationship, or any account of an encounter between Blanche and Christabel that might have occurred between the time of the affair with Ash and Blanche's death. And though Christabel is generally perceived as a lesbian poet by the novel's modern scholars, there is no hard evidence that this is in fact the case. For instance, Blanche may have committed suicide out of unrequited love, or a sense that the dynamics of their "sisterhood" had been irrevocably altered, rather than because she saw her lesbian relationship with Christabel coming to an end.

While one may feel inclined to accord Byatt a certain latitude and read these exclusions as her attempt to convey the silent voices of history, they are the only instances in a novel that could have potentially been filled with such moments. The closure and coherence that Byatt affords her readers throughout the novel, particularly in the passages where she adopts omniscient narration, is noticeably absent here, revealing Byatt's reluctance to incorporate fully this strand of her narrative into the reconstruction of the Victorian past. That Byatt flirts with the idea of a lesbian relationship between Christabel and Blanche, as some kind of unrecorded past, is undermined by her refusal to directly address that history as some alternative version of events. Some have accused Byatt of homophobia, and there is no doubt that the plot has been weighted to give emphasis to the Ash-LaMotte relationship over that of Glover-LaMotte, but Byatt's very obfuscation reveals a greater problem within the text. Ivana Djordjevic, for example, sees Christabel's white gloves as symbol of innocence and that they "may hint . . . at the true nature of the LaMotte-Glover relationship as not lesbian after all" (70). She disagrees with critics who see Byatt as homophobic, but adds that her "attitude to homosexuality does seem to be on the whole disapprobative" (70, n. 58). Taking this aspect of the plot into account, Buxton argues that the novel

is hardly a subversive text; indeed its ideology is a heterosexual, humanist one. We *can* know everything, the novel seems to imply, but Byatt remains (coily?) silent on the exact details of the

purportedly lesbian nature of Blanche Glover's relationship with Christabel LaMotte. (216 Buxton's parenthesis)

As Buxton makes clear, Byatt's exclusion highlights the willful construction of a particular kind of narrative that corresponds more closely to her particular version of the past. The intertexts in the novel ultimately confirm a specific reading of the past constructed by individuals whom Byatt perceives as both enlightened and attuned.

Ellen Ash is also something of a historical puzzle, but for entirely different reasons. For while Blanche wishes to be remembered in the future, Ellen prefers that much of her life should be forgotten. Ellen's protective journal spells out its own project and her attempts to keep the past safe from the scavengers who will rake over the remains of her husband's life. Byatt's narrator speaks of the "carefully *strained* . . . truth of [Ellen's] journal" (P 501). The journal is in a sense a false document that pretends to, but does not, offer an entirely true reflection of her thoughts, since, among other things, there are a number of thoughts she refuses to think. She sees her journal as "both a defense against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and vultures" (P 501). This prophecy is fulfilled when Cropper desecrates the grave to get at the box Ellen has buried with her husband. The journal acts as "bait" since it offers a partial rendering of events in her husband's life. Ellen goes further in her endeavors to protect the past by burning some of Ash's letters, most specifically his final one to Christabel. This letter is never to be seen by any of the scholars. Indeed, there is a fair bit of

information given to the reader that remains inaccessible to the scholars. That Christabel, for example, accused him of turning her into the murderess of Blanche. Or that Ash's and Ellen's honeymoon was not a sexual success, since Ellen's fear of intercourse prevented them from consummating their married relationship (P 499). Again, this appears to be Byatt's way of pointing to the limits of historiography.

One might interpret all of these examples as evidence of a balanced approach to the past, an admission of the imperfections of historical understanding while nonetheless pushing forward. In making some allusion to those elements of the past that have been destroyed by time, Byatt does allow us to experience some of the existential dread linked to such realization, but she also permits herself to ameliorate it by presenting a Romance, complete and coherent onto itself.²⁵ Byatt strives to present realistically some of the limitations of History, before embracing the wholeness provided by her Romance.

Coherence, Closure and the Unfashionable

While Byatt is unabashed in her love for the nineteenth-century novels, she grudgingly concedes that such forms can no longer be applied to contemporary life. Having made this concession, however, she then proceeds to write late twentieth-century versions of them. She admits, for example, that *The Virgin in the Garden* is an attempt to create a world in the style of Eliot's *Middlemarch*.²⁶ And she doggedly pursues this form in *Possession*, striving for the totalizing

constructions of her Victorian ancestors. She defends this choice by voicing an urge to satisfy her and our "genuine narrative hunger":

I haven't used the plot naively: I have pointed out that I am actually going back to writing novels with plot as a technical experiment. But it has given me intense pleasure. I love those Victorian novels in which, when you come to the end, you're told the whole history of every character from the end of the story until their dying day. I love that kind of thing, it makes me very happy. I don't see why we shouldn't have it: it's not wicked, as we were told in the sixties, it's just pleasant. Everybody knows it's fiction, but then everybody knows the whole thing is fiction. (*Interview 88*)

She may well refer to her text as a "technical experiment," but it is more than that. Byatt does not really explain the source of her readerly happiness, but it is safe to assume that it derives from a sense of novelistic unity now considered by some to be naive and outdated. Taking Byatt's last sentence into account, are we simply to discount her approach to the past because it is fiction? When she says the "whole thing is fiction," what does she mean – the book or the world? Byatt bathes in the soothing powers of narrative as they provide her with the means to harness the chaos of time and being. Roland's statement that "Coherence and closure are deep human desires that are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frightening and enchantingly desirable" (*P 456*) implies that human desires may remain constant but that our approaches to them may not. Byatt

sees any disparagement of coherent narrative as disingenuous since we all yearn for order and completeness.

Aside from the numerous textual connections, Byatt also creates coherence through her method of narration. She eschews current convention by resorting to an omniscient narrator at three key points in the novel: Chapters 15 and 25, and the Postscript. At these moments, she provides the reader with information that is unavailable to the modern-day scholars and supposedly inaccessible to anyone else. The omniscient narrator supplies the reader with details and facts that are obviously not recorded in any surviving documents. Byatt justifies her use of the third-person narrator by once again refuting Fowles who "has said that the nineteenth-century narrator was assuming the omniscience of a god. I think rather the opposite is the case – this kind of fictive narrator can creep closer to the feelings and the inner life of characters – as well as providing a Greek chorus – than any first-person mimicry" (*On Histories* 56). Thus third-person narration is more effective than ventriloquism, Byatt's preferred method of rendering the past, about which more later. Her purpose in using the omniscient narrator is "always to tell what the historians and biographers of my fiction never discovered, always to heighten the reader's imaginative entry into the world of the text" (*On Histories* 56). But this knowledge allows us to view her characters ironically. We may not be plagued by uncertainty, but we have traversed the line between a representation of the historical enterprise and a fantasy or perhaps a "romance," to use Byatt's terminology. Thus Byatt brazenly announces

her intention to flout postmodern tendencies, admitting that she prefers what have now become "unfashionable" ways of telling a story.

In *Possession*, she allows her narrator to bring to a satisfying close a story that has announced on more than one occasion its own skepticism about such closure. For while the text constantly acknowledges the silences and the lacunae inherent in historical reconstruction, her self-enclosed universes creates the illusion of a knowable whole, one that satisfies *our* yearning to know. Byatt underscores what has been unread, unsaid, deleted, or destroyed by her characters revealing to us what does not exist in the present. And though this can be read as a critique of the historiographic project and its inadequacies, it also highlights the narrative urge that compels all of us – historians, critics, common readers – to seek meaning and gratifying conclusions.

Buxton suggests that the narrator of Chapter 15 is a "hypothetical observer" or better still "the reader (and the writer) . . . projected into the novel as a fellow traveller" (208). One could extend this construction to stipulate that the chapter is a reflection of an intuitive reconstruction of events as they might occur in the minds of Roland and Maud. Having shed their theoretical guises and postmodern inhibitions, they are able to recreate symbiotically the events that occurred more than a century earlier. Nevertheless, the narratorial shift is likely to shock some readers since they are apt to assume that the man and woman being described in the train at the opening of the chapter are Roland and Maud, not Randolph and Christabel.²⁷ Up to this point in the novel, the modern

characters' experience has been our experience, their perceptions and limitations have been our perceptions and limitations. Suddenly, however, we are privy to insights and observations beyond the scope of the first level of narration.

Byatt has framed her novel to highlight the role of interpretation in our lives. We construct meaning from the information available to us, the stories we find there. This applies to both critical assessments of creative writing and historical reconstruction of primary documents. In both instances, of course, the originary impulse has already been filtered through the web of language. In Chapter 15, however, Byatt forgoes these ideas, ostensibly presenting us with experience unrefracted.²⁸ She simulates the ostensible objectivity historians create for themselves when they address their readers in the third person. Under these auspices, the narrator is simply presenting things as they are, completely detached from the events that unfold before her. We have left the world of interpretation and have now entered the realm of representation. In the first instance, Ash and LaMotte can only be fictional figures for Roland and Maud since they can only "know" them through text. But Byatt allows readers to transcend this gap, to read words that were never recorded, and to sense hidden emotions. The use of omniscient narration allows Byatt to exert fuller authority over her material. Rather than simply hinting at knowledge that may have eluded the present, she presents a full-blown version of past events.

Byatt knows there are parts of our lives that are never expressed, feelings not translated into language, thoughts best left unsaid, ideas never pursued. All of

these absences contribute to the partiality of history. Thus the reading experience of *Possession* is a paradoxical one. For while we can intellectually *know* that a complete transcription of the past is an impossibility, the novel lets us *feel* that the plenitude of the past can be known through a mixture of fact and fiction and an empathetic use of historical imagination.

One wonders whose desire is satiated by such a strategy. It may be Byatt's own, or she may feel compelled to satisfy the narrative yearnings of her readers and account for their own unwillingness to accept irresolution. When Byatt speaks of "heighten[ing] the reader's imaginative entry into the world of the text," she means providing the reader with additional facts and information. Thus she establishes coherence in her novel by supplementing our imagination with necessary details. It is almost as though she fears that our reconstruction of her fiction will be as incomplete or subjective as that of her modern characters. A great deal of the mystery in the novel is removed with the inclusion of these omniscient passages and, as in the detective novel, she provides all the information needed so that our knowledge is complete and any sense of uncertainty is dissolved. The novel plays constantly with the tensions between an awareness of the basic uncertainty and a continued assertion that one can know.

Byatt's focus on epistemological concerns reveals itself clearly in Chapter 15 where the love of the Randolph and Christabel is described almost exclusively in terms of knowing and being known. Early in the chapter, the narrator describes

Randolph's growing "knowledge" of Christabel. At first, he uses his imaginative faculties in constructing an image of her for himself: "She had been distant and closed away, a princess in a tower, and his imagination's work had been all to make her present, all of her, to his mind and senses, the quickness of her and the mystery" (P 301). Now that she is physically present, he feels that he can compare his image with the reality. The reality, however, is not as transparent as he would believe. Ash places a great deal of confidence in his ability to know others, past and present, and Christabel is no exception. When Randolph and Christabel do sexually consummate their relationship, the text frames their passion in epistemological terms rather than erotic ones. Randolph is portrayed as a poet "greedy for information, for facts, for details" whose desire for Christabel can be reduced to a need to "know" her in something more than the Biblical sense (P 301). The relationship's foundation rests almost entirely on the concept of knowing the other. Christabel stands as another piece of the puzzle that requires incorporation into Ash's view of the world: "So now his love for this woman, known intimately and not at all, was voracious for information. He learned her" (P 301).

In contrast, Christabel's response to the affair is more pragmatic since she sees it as a product of "necessity." She accepts her desire and accedes to its inevitability. She harbors no illusions about the pain that is sure to ensue from their actions. She does not share Randolph's "greedy curiosity" or his certitude about the future. He believes that he has pierced through her exterior and

grasped her essence. He senses her reluctance, her feelings of entrapment, and believes he has the power to remedy the situation: "He would change all that. He could change all that, he was tolerably certain. He *knew* her, he believed. He would teach her that she was not his possession" (P 304). But later when he declares that they "know each other very well," she declares, "And in others, not at all." He retorts that "that can be remedied," but she replies, "Not wholly" (P 304). Christabel asserts the existence of gaps in knowledge, though she does allow that knowledge is an acquirable thing. After their first bout of lovemaking, however, he pushes the issue, declaring "You see, I know you," to which she answers, "Yes, I concede. You know" (P 308). In her epistemological rendering of what should be the most passionate and affectively charged moment in the novel, Byatt reveals her preoccupations with the life of the mind. The relationship is thus presented as analogous to the historiographic project framed in terms of knowledge. The emphasis is squarely placed on the question of how much one can know. Randolph's "knowledge" of Christabel is based upon facts he has gathered and his imaginative creation of some kind of narrative about her. The novel asks if we can distinguish for ourselves what portion of what we "know" is knowledge (how someone truly is) and how much is imagination (how much someone is the way we make them out to be). Again, paradoxically, Byatt raises the specter of epistemological dread, the fear that we shall never know, and then washes it away by assuring us that narrative can provide the authentic means of knowing.

In Chapter 25, Byatt uses various forms of discourse: a journal entry (Ellen Ash's), a sample of academic writing from Cropper's biography, a letter (from Christabel to Ellen), and, once again, omniscient narration. This return to omniscience may elude the attention of readers at first because the chapter begins with an entry from Ellen Ash's Journal, which is then followed by an excerpt from Cropper's biography of Ash describing the same days, which is in turn followed by what appears to be another journal entry dated, in the same typeface, November 27th 1889 (P 485). This portion, however, signals the return of the omniscient narrator who describes Ellen's thoughts as she prepares to bury her husband. The maneuver is a significant one, since the inclusion of the date may lead us, initially to read the pages as an objective, firsthand account.

Again, as readers, we are provided with information and confirmation not afforded to the modern-day scholars. We are told that Ellen knew of the affair between her husband and LaMotte, and we are directly informed that Blanche visited Ellen twice. We are also given the length of the affair - one summer. Ironically, the chapter allows for insight into many of the things Ellen Ash desires to keep hidden. What may not be clear is the extent to which she is fulfilling her husband's wishes and the extent to which they are also her own. At one point, she notes in her journal that Ash implored her to "burn what is alive for us with the life of our memory, and let no one else make idle curios or lies of it" (P 480-1). By this point in the novel, however, we are likely to be wary of

Ellen's own processes of selection and exclusion in the creation of the narrative in her journal.

Ellen herself is aware of her "desire not to be told, not to hear" (P 492) and the consequences of such privation on her creation of a historical document. At one point, she wonders: "Had she done well, or ill? She had done what was in her nature, which was profoundly implicated in not knowing, in silence, in avoidance, she said to herself, in harsher moments" (P 494). Such an approach necessarily limits the possibility of "truth" in any document. And while Ellen may feel some pride in being true to herself, she also engages in creating a one-sided representation, false to the extent that it is not *entirely* true. Ellen's philosophy depends upon the idea that the truth is not only made up of those things that can be seen and recorded. Ellen considers "her sense of the unspoken truth of things" (P 497) in terms of a passage from Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, in which he describes unseen subterranean changes that affect life on the surface. The text establishes a connection here between these geological movements and Ellen's inner emotional life, which exists but is not recorded.

But Byatt once more feels compelled to tell us what we could not know rather than letting us infer it. Her narrative betrays her conviction that without these interventions on the part of the author, the complete past would remain something entirely out of reach. The narrator reveals to us the hidden aspect of Ellen's life, namely the secret about their honeymoon - her inability to engage in sexual intercourse - and her conviction never to speak of it: "She did not

remember it in words. There were no words attached to it, that was part of the horror. She had never spoken of it to anyone, not even to Randolph, precisely not to Randolph" (P 498). We are told she remembers her "horror" through images rather than words. Byatt finds herself in a bind, however, since she wishes to communicate Ellen's experience to her readers. Thus the page that follows Ellen's declaration creates images - in words - that describe the failure of the honeymoon in near-explicit detail:

A thin white animal, herself, trembling.

A complex thing, the naked male, curly hairs and shining wet, at once bovine and dolphin-like, its scent feral and overwhelming.

A large hand, held out in kindness, not once, but many times, slapped away, pushed away, slapped away. (P 498)

The narrator gives words to what Ellen is unable or unwilling to do. The "living language of nature" describes Ash's repeated attempts at consummation and Ellen's continued rejections - they are both creatures, one preying, the other evading. Here the text plays with the notion that not all experience can be described in language, and thus is never chronicled. Such a fact immediately impinges upon the work of the historian who is limited to discursive texts in an attempt to reconstruct the past. One understands the common perception, among the male characters in the novel, of Ellen Ash as one of these "helpers" who exist as blurry shapes in the recorded lives of great men. One point worth noting is that the information Byatt provides in this chapter corroborates Beatrice

Nest's suspicion that Ellen "could have said something interesting" (P 240), but chose to remain in silence. One can see Ellen Ash as Byatt's tribute to those who, in George Eliot's words, "lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs" (896).

Byatt returns to the idea of unchronicled events in the Postscript to her novel, the omniscient interjection most likely to elicit the strongest accusation of bad faith. The Postscript, dated 1868, reads as an addendum of sorts, since Byatt has concluded her modern plot with a number of significant revelations stolen from Ash's grave. The modern scholars now know that a daughter lived and that Maud is a direct descendant. These things are true. They also know that Ash never met his daughter and that the strand of hair inside the watch is Christabel's. These things are false. We know they are false thanks to Byatt's Postscript:

There are things that happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been.

Two people met, on a hot May day, and never mentioned their meeting. This is how it was. (P 552)

Much of Byatt's novel has, of course, questioned our abilities to know "this is how it was." And yet this is precisely what this Postscript sets out to accomplish. Byatt seems to be glorying in her unfashionability. No matter what

indeterminacy she may have raised throughout the text, Byatt seems to hold out the hope things can be known – there is some referent that compels the creation of the text. Like the traditional historian, the novelist finally wishes to erase herself from the text. Through her omniscient narration she creates the impression of a transparent past that simply waits to be recorded. Ostensibly removed from the text and the present in which the story is being recounted, the author creates the illusion that the reader is being given direct, unmediated access to the past. Our relationship with the past is de-problematized at that moment, since we need no longer concern ourselves with the author who is merely the medium through which the past is transmitted. Whatever has come before the Postscript is swept away by the overwhelming desire to speak in declarative sentences.

The final pages of the novel tell of an unrecorded meeting between Ash and his daughter, Maia, in May 1868, in what can only be described as a perfect pastoral setting. In the process of talking with his daughter, Ash discovers that Christabel has taken on the guise of Maia's aunt to avoid any scandal and lives on the periphery of her child's life. He tells Maia to give her aunt a message. She promises to do so, but the novel concludes with the sentence: "And on the way home, she met her brothers, and there was a rough-and-tumble, and the lovely crown was broken, and she forgot the message, which was never delivered" (P 555). Kathleen Kelly suggests the undelivered message "represents all the 'what ifs' and 'if onlys' of human relationships. Moreover, and more critically, the

undelivered message represents the writer's dilemma, the difficulty of saying, finally, all that one sets out to say" (98).²⁹ The problem with this observation is that Byatt does not really have a dilemma, nor does she exhibit any difficulty in saying all that needs to be said.

In her final display of omniscience, to know more than Ash or LaMotte know, Byatt once more exhibits the desire to give us a postmodern novel in Victorian fittings. As Linda Hutcheon observes, historiographic metafiction "makes you want to have your historical referent and erase it too" (*Poetics* 145). Despite the highlighting of indeterminacy, Byatt offers "unfashionable" closure and strives to offer total readerly satisfaction. The novel emphasizes the perpetual possibility of re-reading history. Since any historical reconstruction is necessarily incomplete and can be transformed through the acquisition of new information, it stands to reason that any belief is on tenuous and provisional ground. One might think of any number of historical permutations that would alter the present interpretations of the scholars. Here Byatt highlights the limitations of the historiographic project *and* our overwhelming desire to overcome them, for although there might be any number of possible interpretations of what happened on the fateful trip to Yorkshire, of how Ellen Ash responded to the affair, or of how Ash died without knowing his daughter lived, Byatt eliminates any indeterminacy by telling us *how it really was*. The presence of a fragment, as many historians contend, often obviates the existence of the whole. Byatt, however, is not content to let us infer this whole. Rather than give us a realistic

representation of our problematic and sometimes unsatisfactory relationship with the past, she surrenders to *her* and what she perceives as *our* desire for totality.

The closure in *Possession* creates a totality from which readers can safely observe the past. Teleology imposes meaning to events, since they can now be read retrospectively as contributing and leading to this end. As Peter Brooks suggests, "If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*" (52). We desire the end because it relegates the past to a space from which it no longer has the potential to affect adversely the present. Byatt addresses the subject of narrative greed or hunger in her novel, as her characters express their needs for ends. At one point Ash exclaims, "I cannot bear not to know the end of a tale. I will read the most trivial things - once commenced - only out of a feverish greed to be able to swallow the ending - sweet or sour - and to be done with what I need never have embarked on" (P 193). We need ends to remove any trace of uncertainty we may harbor, any doubts that may remain in the unfolding of the plot. Ends give definite shape to things, allowing us to compartmentalize them, and thus feel that we truly know them. Ends permit us to interact with the past and maintain those boundaries that enable us to preserve our sense of authority over them. The past is perceived as both a burden and a constraint that prevents the present from proceeding as smoothly as it should or would. Part of the desire in telling a

story derives from coming to terms with the past, containing it, and relegating it to a space wherein it no longer possesses the power to affect the present or future. That authority over the past comes in the form of established ends that reconcile whatever insecurities may have been raised in the construction of the narrative.

This concept helps us to understand why so many of the modern characters in *Possession* live vicariously through figures of the past. There is a pronounced feeling in the novel that the past is a fuller, more substantial place than the present and that those who lived in it were therefore more substantial themselves. This substantiality owes a great deal to the fact that they are dead. That end imbues their lives with an integrity not accessible to the living. This wholeness can only be captured in the present in the form of a narrative that contains a beginning, a middle, and an end. Such a construction allows us to experience momentarily that wholeness for which we so desperately yearn. But, as we shall see, Byatt not only intends to speak *of* the past, she also wants to speak *for* the past.

Ventriloquism, Literary Spiritualism and Resurrection

In addition to third-person narration, Byatt's establishment of coherence is accomplished through what she terms her "ventriloquism." In her use of this technique, she affirms that some degree of personal dissociation can occur so that the history being reconstructed is less tainted by the subjectivity of the teller. In

such a way the past is temporarily restored and therefore not lost to us. The poor state of affairs between literature and its academic superstructure has led Byatt to adopt such an approach:

ventriloquism became necessary because of what I felt was the increasing gulf between current literary criticism and the words of the literary texts it in some sense discusses. Modern criticism is powerful and imposes its own narratives and priorities on the writings it uses as raw material, source, or jumping-off point. (*On Histories* 45)

In other words, Byatt perceives present criticism as interfering rather than aiding the reader to connect with the past. Ventriloquism seeks to remedy that impasse.

Discussing the historical novels of Peter Ackroyd, with which she professes an affinity,³⁰ Byatt observes that his ventriloquism "serves to emphasise at once the presence of the past and its distance, its difference, its death and difficult resurrection" (*On Histories* 45). Our relationship with the past is a problematic one, as the various approaches used by the scholars in *Possession* illuminate. The challenge appears to be to find the proper balance between the present self and the past other, so that the benefit of retrospection can be combined with an empathetic reliving of past lives. The characters in her novel struggle, as does she, to maintain that balance so that immersion is established but not at the cost of losing the meanings afforded by the present's ability to stand outside the past. Through its ability to contain discordant narratives literature effectively

communicates both points of view. In other words, fiction allows Byatt to speak with the two voices of the dead and of the living.

The reader is invited, indeed urged, to compare the worlds of the two plots. But it is not simply an exercise of compare and contrast, because while Byatt may engage in making value judgments about one period in contrast to another, the lines that demarcate them are substantially blurred. These two worlds occupy the same textual space while pointing to the incongruity of such a pairing. The text's intricate network of correspondences prevents us from either separating them entirely or bringing them into accord, so that the intellectual gratification of radical discontinuity is as impossible to achieve as the pleasure of an integrated form. These two moments remain in unstable relationship with each other so that one is never the other, but also never entirely *not* the other. We are constantly intrigued by the resemblances between us and the Victorians and constantly frustrated by the gap that refuses to be breached for no sooner do we come to terms with the existence of this unbreachability than we are presented with a new component that appears to stress the unmistakable link between them. Such a construction keeps the reader in a constant state of instability because we know the Victorian period is not our own, but it is not as different as we would like to believe.

Byatt's ventriloquism makes the past as real as the present. She conjures up their lives and their period through the mere evocation of their words and vocabulary. The much-maligned freedom of fiction permits it to juxtapose the

voices of the dead with those of the living. This freedom allows Byatt to claim that *Possession* "is about all these things, ventriloquism, love for the dead, the presence of literary texts as the voices of persistent ghosts or spirits" (*On Histories* 45). Looking closely at Byatt's choice of words - "dead," "ghosts," "spirits" - the connection between Byatt's ventriloquism and her interest in spiritualism soon becomes clear.

Spiritualism is a significant component of Byatt's neo-Victorian fiction for a number of reasons. The growth of spiritualism in the nineteenth-century is often linked to increasing uncertainty about religious beliefs and the question of the afterlife.³¹ Again, this uncertainty bears some resemblance to our own *fin-de-siècle* doubts. Kelly also suggests that Byatt's interest in mediums and spiritualism stems from her perception of "the unique roles women had in it. Many women were able to make a name for themselves - and more important, a living - in this popular movement" (107). A passage in one of Ash's dramatic monologue, *Mummy Possesst*, makes this clear. The speaker, a medium, asks her protégé, "Know you not that we Women have no Power/ In the cold world of objects Reason rules,/ Where all is measured and mechanical?" (*P* 443). In the world of material men, in other words, these women are powerless since their emotions and intuitions have no value. Such is not the case in the world of spiritualism, however:

Here we have Power, here the Irrational,

The Intuition of the Unseen Powers

Speaks to our women's nerves, galvanic threads
 Which gather up, interpret and transmit
 The Unseen Powers and their hidden Will.
 This is *our* negative world, where the Unseen,
 Unheard, Impalpable, and Unconfined
 Speak to and through *us* - it is *we* who hear,
 Our natures that receive their thrilling force. (P 443)

The passage clearly highlights those areas of human experience that are the purview of women, but also the qualities that allow the spiritualist to communicate with the afterworld are ones needed by any novelist and to some degree any historian who wishes to access successfully the past. This is a central theme in Byatt's novella *The Conjugal Angel*.

The story focuses on the séances held by Liliás Papagay and her own protégé, Sophy Sheekhy. While Sophy exhibits real psychic powers and an ability to communicate with the dead, Liliás's "fictionalizing" serves a parallel purpose. What she lacks in true spiritual insight, Mrs. Papagay compensates for in poetic imagination. She often engages in "passive writing," ostensibly channeling the energy in the room through her pen. But Liliás can also intimate the reality of someone else's life simply by imagining it. During one particular session, the focus is on Mrs. Hearnshaw who has lost five children in infancy. Sensing that Sophy will not provide the necessary results this time, Liliás takes over. But her writing does not simply stop at the message sent by Mrs. Hearnshaw's dead

children that she will bear another child. The narrator notes that "Mrs Papagay's irrepressible imagination rushed into Mrs Hearnshaw's conjugal bedroom" (*Angels* 229). In a frightful vision, she imagines Mr. Hearnshaw forcing himself once more upon his helpless wife, who is clearly on the verge of a nervous collapse. Disturbed by this vision, Liliash tries to change her first imaginative reconstruction but concedes that her second attempt "didn't feel as natural as the first scene did" (*Angels* 231). What the text emphasizes at this moment is the imagination's ability to uncover the truth. Indeed, in her own intuitive way, Liliash manages to demonstrate a certain psychic power of her own. This causes her to question the veracity of the stories she tells herself and wonder "whether other people told themselves stories in this way in their heads, whether everyone made up everyone else, living and dead, at every turn, whether this she knew about Mrs Hearnshaw could be called knowledge or lies, or both, as the spirits had *known* what Mrs Hearnshaw had confirmed, that she was indeed *enceinte*" (*Angels* 231). Liliash's vision, which she attributes to spirits, is in fact largely a product of the imagination – the tool most invaluable, the text implies, in the reconstruction of the lives of people, living or dead.

One of the attendees at Mrs. Papagay's séances is Emily Jesse, née Tennyson, and it is through this character that Byatt further strengthens the connection between spiritualism and the writing of fiction. Sections VII and VIII of the novella are Byatt's fictional reconstruction of portions of Emily's life, primarily the brief period of her engagement to Arthur Hallam before his untimely death.

These sections bear a great deal of similarity with "Precipice-Encurled" in their attention to a figure largely forgotten by history.³² Emily Jesse's recollections are directly juxtaposed with Sophy's actual encounter with Arthur's spirit – again, highlighting the close link between imaginative storytelling and spiritualism, and the ability of stories to keep the past alive, often on an affective level.

Hallam is, of course, the subject of Alfred Tennyson's monumental *In Memoriam*. Emily's relationship to her brother's poem is ambivalent because it often made her feel as though her mourning for Arthur was inadequate. At the same time, despite her pain and anguish she admires it greatly because

it expressed exactly the nature of her own shock and sorrow, the very structure and slow process of pain, and the transformations and transmutations of grief, like rot in the earth-mould, like roots and other blind things moving in the grave. Other things also, it expressed, the desire for the presence of the dead, the hand to clasp, the bright eye, the voice, the thoughts spoken and unspoken.

(*Angels* 268)

The poem resuscitates the past, making us feel it once more, as though it has not disappeared into the ether. During the encounter between Sophy and the spirit of Arthur, Byatt once more emphasizes the importance of poetry in the resurrection of the dead: "Poems are the ghosts of sensations . . . the ghosts of thoughts" (*Angels* 291). Our connections to the past are ephemeral, but the written word possesses the capability of evoking it in our mind's eye. So

memories and figures from the past can be raised, but they are ghostly entities prone to vanishing in thin air at the slightest disturbance of the mental structure the words have created.

Section X shows an aging Tennyson, at the same time, sitting on the edge of his bed, buttoning his nightshirt and being visited by memories similar to those of Emily Jesse. He recalls his relationship with Arthur – Byatt implies some homoerotic attraction – and his consequent grief at the latter's death. The section primarily concerns itself with Tennyson's writing *In Memoriam*, from a fictional perspective, and its struggles to keep the past alive in the present. Tennyson sees himself as a kind of conduit for poets of the past: "If the air was full of the ghostly voices of his ancestors, his poem let them sing out again, Dante and Theocritus, Milton and the lost Keats, whose language was their afterlife" (*Angels* 312). The theme of literature as resurrection is one that runs through much of Byatt's neo-Victorian fiction. It finds its most fervent expression in this novella.

So Byatt's sympathetic representation of spiritualism also arises from the fact that she perceives herself as performing an analogous activity. Through her ventriloquism she too strives to give voice to the dead. The theme of author-as-medium is one that a number of critics have addressed.³³ Byatt channels the voices of the past, believing that she is truly communicating a sense of what the past was like. So while she may express a certain degree of skepticism about the abilities of various spiritualists, there is a certain degree of endorsement of the medium's ability to channel the dead. For example, though Ash's poem, *Mummy*

Possess, is written primarily as an indictment of fraudulent mediums, the poet sees the actions of the spiritualists as not markedly different from his own. In much the same way that Browning wrote of Mr. Sludge, Ash writes of Harriet Lees. He recognizes the manner in which her "art" serves to resurrect the past:

You call these spirit *mises en scène* a lie.

I call it artfulness, or simply Art,

A Tale, a Story, that may hide the Truth

As wonder-tales do, even in the Best Book. (P 442)

The echoes to the poet's "Mr. Sludge," one of the epigraphs that opens the novel, are unmistakable. A direct link can in fact be made between Browning (the historical figure), Ash (the fictionalized poet), and Byatt (the author). The convictions expressed by Browning are held by Byatt and her fictional creation, himself a fictionalized version of the Victorian poet. Ivana Djordjevic takes the dynamics of this relationship one step further by asking "is not the implicit faith of believers in spiritualism in many ways analogous to that willing suspension of disbelief all believers in fiction must constantly exercise?" (69). Readers of historical fiction particularly are asked to believe that the author's reconstruction of the past is a faithful and accurate one. The ultimate goal of the ventriloquist is to make listeners believe that the voice they hear is other than that of the speaker. Writing to LaMotte of his own dramatic monologues, Ash observes:

I find I am at ease with other imagined minds – bringing to life,
restoring in some sense to vitality, the whole vanished men of other

times, hair, teeth, fingernails, porringer, bench, wineskin, church, temple, synagogue and the incessant weaving labour of the marvellous brain inside the skull - making its patterns, its most particular sense of what it sees and learns and believes.³⁴ (P 174)

These words recall those of Byatt's fictionalized Browning in "Precipice-Encurled." While contemplating writing a poem in Descartes's voice, he thinks: "A man can inhabit another man's mind, or body, or senses, or history, can jerk it into a kind of life, as galvanism moves frogs" (*Sugar* 191). And this story first raises the idea that a life is fullest in the process of creating or fictionalizing another life, presenting it complete. "The best part of my life, the life I have lived most intensely," thinks the poet, "has been the fitting, the infiltrating, the inventing the self of another man or woman, explored and sleekly filled out, as fingers swell a glove" (*Sugar* 191). These same convictions compel Byatt to write a novel like *Possession*.³⁵

The sentiments expressed by both Ash and the fictionalized Browning mirror Byatt's own steadfast belief that she can speak with the voices of the Victorian dead.³⁶ Byatt is creating her own form of "literary spiritualism." She shares the aesthetic principles of her literary creation who states "Whatever the absolute Truth - or Untruth - of that old life-in-death - Poetry can make that man live for the length of the faith you or any other choose to give him . . . I am saying that without the Maker's imagination nothing can live for us - whether alive or dead, or once alive and now dead, or waiting to be brought to life - " (P 185). Byatt

invests language and poetic language in particular with the supernatural ability to raise dead men up from nothing. In a long essay on Browning, Byatt establishes a connection between the poet and the historian, Jules Michelet, through their mutual belief in their "bringing to life of the dead in the history of Humanity" (*Passions* 32).³⁷ Byatt examines the analogies both men make with the image of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead. She shares some affinity with this comparison since she makes at least three references to Lazarus herself in *Possession* (P 185, 373, 433). Taking all this into account, Byatt's form of ventriloquism – speaking with the voice of the Other – is simply another form of resurrection.

Commenting on *Possession*, Byatt reveals her own belief in the possibility of historical resurrection through fiction: "writing Victorian words in Victorian contexts, in a Victorian order, and in Victorian relations of one word to the next was the only way I could think of to show one could hear the Victorian dead" (*On Histories* 46-7). This assertion bears a striking resemblance to an admission made by Stephen Greenblatt at the beginning of *Shakespearean Negotiations*. In the opening essay, "The Circulation of Social Energy," he reveals that he "began with the desire to speak with the dead" (1). Greenblatt explains his motivations for engaging in his historical studies. He believes that the dead speak through texts and that it is the reader's task to hear those voices; to read the text in such a way as to reawaken the voices from the past. Greenblatt insists that he is not the first person to have these impulses: "This desire is a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in

literary studies, a motive organized, professionalized, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum: literature professors are salaried, middle-class shamans" (1). Greenblatt's use of the word "shaman" invokes the spiritualist side of the historiographic enterprise. But the shamanism here is not the loftiest kind, and there is some awareness that the conjured images may be nothing more than the projections of the shaman himself. Such a realization does not hinder Greenblatt in pursuing his quest: "Even when I came to understand that in my most intense moments of straining to listen all I could hear was my own voice, even then I did not abandon my desire" (1). This sounds strangely like the same compulsion that drives a knowing Byatt, familiar with all the indeterminacy and contingency raised by poststructuralist theory, to pursue a project that hinges upon the author's ability to channel and ventriloquise the Victorian dead. Much like Greenblatt, Byatt believes that "my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living" (1).³⁸ She reveals the depths of this conviction in her "simulations" of Victorian poetry, since the poems of Ash and LaMotte in *Possession* are Byatt's own. Greenblatt's configuration of voices also illuminates that the desire to speak *with* the dead often leads to the desire to speak *for* the dead. The line that separates these two impulses is hard to identify. Byatt addresses these dynamics in her presentation of a number of different approaches to the past in the novel. Spiritualism may share some characteristics with literature, but it is a far more problematic enterprise.

This connection with Greenblatt is not gratuitous because it suggests how Byatt practices her own form of "self-enclosed" New Historicism, creating her own textual traces to present a coherent and somewhat unified picture of the past. In fact, the novel might be called an exercise in literary ventriloquism since, as Chris Walsh points out, Byatt uses "the writings of no fewer than seventeen fictional characters" (186). Walsh emphasizes the readerly skills required to make sense of such a textual fabric, but I would also highlight the sheer constructedness of the novel and its eventual overwhelming of any reader's resistance to being submerged into such a world. This is effected primarily through repeated connections and correlations made between fictional and non-fictional texts, not unlike the technique often used by Greenblatt and some New Historicists. Byatt manipulates her paratexts so that the various discourses comment upon and illuminate each other, again very much in a New Historicist manner. As Linda Hutcheon argues, these paratexts such as footnotes, epigraphs, epilogues serve "to remind us of the narrativity (and fictionality) of the primary text and to assert its factuality and historicity" (*Politics* 85). Byatt creates her own Victorian World Picture.

In *The Writing of History*, Michel De Certeau outlines two possible positions the historian may adopt towards the past and the elusive "real": "One type of history ponders what is comprehensible and what are the conditions of understanding; the other claims to reencounter lived experience, exhumed by virtue of a knowledge of the past" (35). The second approach interests us in

terms of Byatt's novel since, according to de Certeau, it "valorizes the relation the historian keeps with a lived experience, that is, with the possibility of resuscitating or 'reviving' a past. It would like to restore the forgotten and to meet again men of the past amidst the traces they have left " (35-6). Such an approach to the past requires that it be perceived as a living thing, something that still breathes in the present moment. The recipe demands a configuration that sees the past as definitively past and dead, thus subject to objective scrutiny, but also as still present and living in various remnants.³⁹ This is quite similar to a philosophy espoused by Ash, one that he shares with Robert Browning, and by extension Byatt. In an angry but controlled letter written to Cropper's great-grandmother, Ash attacks spiritualism and attempts to distinguish its activities from his own. Mrs. Cropper has written to him of a séance in which she purportedly contacted the spirit of Coleridge. Measuring his outrage, Ash writes back that such visions are brought about by "a miasma or creeping mist of spiritual anxiety and febrile imagination" (P 116). He notes that the "Historian and the Man of Science alike may be said to traffic with the dead," but he concedes that a poet also contributes to this circulation of ideas:

I myself, with the aid of the imagination, have worked a little in that line, have ventriloquised, have lent my voice to, and mixt my life with, those past voices and lives whose resuscitation in our own lives as warnings, as examples, as the life past persisting in us, is the business of every thinking man and woman. (P 116)

He does, however, insist on pointing to a distinction:

But there are ways and ways, as you must well know, and some are tried and tested, and others are fraught with danger and disappointment A lifetime's study will not make accessible to us more than a fragment of our own ancestral past, let alone the aeons before our race was formed. But that fragment we must thoroughly possess and hand on. (*P* 116)

These might very well be Byatt's own words, describing her own approach to the past and the Victorian dead. In this passage, the poet distinguishes himself from the medium and aligns himself with the historian and the man of science. The implication is that the poet's conjuration of the past is necessarily truer than any image constructed by the spiritualist. Both play, however, on the wishes of the listener who wants to hear and see certain things.

De Certeau points out that narrative is the preferred form of this second approach, as the illusion is more easily rendered and maintained. And it is nothing more than an illusion, of course. Any claim of resurrection as Byatt so avidly propounds it, de Certeau sees as a "lure" - "history does not resuscitate anything" (47). History provides the grounds upon which a present can be constructed:

founded on the rupture between a past that is its object, and a present that is the place of its practice, history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice. Inhabited by the

uncanniness that it seeks, history imposes its law upon the faraway places that it conquers when it fosters the illusion that it is bringing them back to life. (de Certeau 36)

It is an illusion worth hanging onto since the reconfigured past is often one that maintains our present. The very act of speaking about the past constitutes it as *other*, as something to be differentiated from the self. What de Certeau questions is the oft-argued point that history must be told, because the truth of the past can teach something to the present and therefore cannot be ignored. Such invocations merely disguise the history we wish to tell. History is simply the imposition of present desires upon the past.

In an essay entitled, "Why Bother with History?" Keith Jenkins addresses the very dynamics of the relationship between the past and the present and the role that history ostensibly plays in reconciling the two. Replying to Geoff Bennington's assertion that history is both *demanding* because it requires something from us and *demanded* because we require that it reveal its secrets to us,⁴⁰ he argues that these two suppositions can be conflated:

In so far as we have thought that there really is a history (a past) that has its own demands, then we have forgotten that we've merely been throwing our voice. As soon as you think about it, the idea of a historicised past existing independent of our variously present-day constitutive concerns, is an absurd one . . . *All* the characteristics alleged to belong to 'the past' belong to us. *All* the

demands allegedly from the past are demands we make of the past.

("Why Bother" 150-1)

Jenkins's questioning of the historical "voice" immediately raises doubts about Byatt's ventriloquism. In *Possession*, Byatt creates a context in which a demanding past exerts a great deal of power for it propels the modern characters forward, filling them with desires they do not even know they possess. And Byatt's framing of her Victorian plot within her modern one bestows upon the former a legitimate existence. The motor of the plot is energized by its Victorian components, not its modern ones. But as de Certeau points out, this is an illusion, since it is really the present that exercises its influence on the past, twisting it to do its bidding.

Thus the past is not presented to us as *it really was* but is entirely constituted, and doubly so, if we consider that the primary documents from the past, the textual traces used to fabricate the Victorian plot, are entirely created by Byatt herself. Whatever version of the Victorian period Byatt creates is simply a means of corroborating her version of the present, what she deems to be the proper path for the future. This is a criticism often leveled at various forms of historiography, that the past we *think* we see is the past we *want* to see.

History and Reading the Past

In his essay "Postmodern Fiction and History," Allen Thiher posits an oppositional and paradoxical relationship between literature and history. In fact,

he suggests that the label *postmodern* might be reserved for those texts that "manifest their hostility and distrust toward history" (Thiher 14). Overcome by its envy for a discourse that shares a closer relationship to the real, writers of literature undertake to subvert and deny history's discursive truth. Stipulating the primacy of history, Thiher explains the dynamics of this attraction/repulsion relationship:

Contemporary writers - and postmodern fabulators even more so - find themselves at once drawn to embracing history as the ultimate discourse - for who can resist the seduction of the real - at the same time that they reject the claims of history as fantasy, projection, rationalization, theodicy, textual naiveté, or whatever. (14)

Thus *Possession* is a postmodern text that invokes the contradictions and paradoxes implicit in literature's uneasy alliance with the historiographic method. As we have seen, the text is often touted as a critique of history. The title of Byatt's novel, for example, is often given an ironic reading and critics see the text as a warning to those who believe that they can "possess" the past. At the same time, the subtitle and the accompanying epigraphs can be understood as authorizing a romantic conception of the past in which the complete picture can be grasped. Having raised these contradictions, Byatt acquiesces to her historical anxiety and presents a narrative in which they are all resolved. No matter how much she may try to frame this as some kind of fantasy, the message remains clear: we can know the past, we simply have to know how to read it.

So while the novel raises questions about the veracity and verifiability of historical knowledge, it also contends that some form of contingent order can be imposed on the chaos of the past, primarily through narrative. Since the past in *Possession* is made up entirely of textual traces, the most fundamental skill of a good historian is an ability to decipher and configure those traces into a narrative that yields meaning. At the same time, Byatt plays with the distinctions between various discourses, flouting the idea that one form of narration may be just as suitable, if not more so, in deciphering the mysteries of the past. The blurring of fact and fiction in her neo-Victorian fiction indicates the degree to which she believes that truth about the past can be attained by other than objective measures.

As literary detectives, Roland and Maud piece together a plausible plot to explain events and the literary production of the two Victorian poets. This plot depends as much on establishing a structure of feeling as on putting the facts into some plausible order. Though part of their reconstruction is the product of stumbling upon evidence by pure chance, it acquires its plausibility from their ability to hear the voices in ways that the other scholars do not. It is Maud's remembering a particular line of verse of LaMotte's - "Dolly keeps a secret" - that leads to the discovery of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence. The novel also emphasizes the role of fictionalizing in coming to some sense of the past. To breathe life into these dry papery manuscripts, and to resurrect figures from the

past requires imagination – something that will also enable them to make intuitive links between the traces available to them.

Byatt's fiction reveals the discursivity of historical knowledge in her depiction of it as inherently metaphorical – since we cannot have history, we will create persuasive images of it. This very awareness of the textuality of history, however, leads to the urge to simulate the plenitude of the past in what Greenblatt has called the text's "full situation." Byatt's texts thus combine, contrast, and play off each other in painting a picture of the times. The variety of textual forms and their constant juxtaposition make clear that she is writing an examination of Victorian discursive practices and, in effect, creating a representation of the circulation of social energy or, at least, a textualized society engendered by the Victorians during the mid-nineteenth century. This complex reconstruction is Byatt's attempt to keep that past alive and to assuage as much as possible her, and our, anxieties about the postmodern present.

Byatt's masterful plotting explores the connections between various discursive practices and simulates a unified representation of the past. Roland and Maud arrive at their conclusions about the world they envy through precisely this strategy. Their readings of diverse textual traces finally permit them to solve the mystery of the Ash-LaMotte affair. That their textual quest should end in a "flesh-and-blood discovery" (Jukic 84) – Maud's realization of her true genealogy – further confirms the quest's power to discover some "real" truth.

Byatt requires the reader to engage in the same enterprise with a sense that things can be known about the past. One's ability to ventriloquize the past is contingent upon the one's ability to translate the written word into voices. Some critics have interpreted this dialogism, or emphasis on a multiplicity of voices, as an escape from a monolithic and totalizing reading of the past.⁴¹ The problem with such a reading of *Possession* is that it fails to take into account Byatt's essential conservatism and her reconciliation of any discordant readings in the writing of her Postscript. Byatt's inclusion of omniscient narration is not simply play, it is, in fact, incontrovertible evidence of her desire for her own closed reading of the past.

One final observation on the text's manipulation of the reader. In the midst of Chapter 26 devoted to Roland's transformation an authorial interjection proposes different levels of reading. The narrator enumerates the dutiful, the personal, and the impersonal (P 511-12). She also suggests that there is a rarer fourth type not named, which we might call the epiphanic or an epistemological sublime:

Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble . . . when the knowledge that we *shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we the readers, knew it was

always there, and have *always known*, it was as it was, though we have now the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge. (P 512, Byatt's italics)

If we extend this comment to include the concept of history-as-text, then it confirms even more solidly Byatt's faith in the possibility of historical knowledge. Byatt, in essence, writes her own directives for reading the past. Despite its postmodern and poststructuralist disclaimers, *Possession* becomes a manual for just that – *possession of the past*.

It is important to note here that though Byatt displays the greatest degree of confidence in narrative's capacity to reassemble the past, both McEwan and Rushdie also demonstrate faith in the writer's ability to emplot historical events in a coherent narrative. These novelists play with the blurred boundaries between the discourses of history and fiction, exemplifying through fiction how history is made and remade. As such, they demonstrate a proactive approach to the past, wresting control from the imprint of history. Byatt's faith in narrative, however, is attenuated by a steady knowledge of its provisional status. Thus the coherence and closure she provides at the end of the novel discomforts the reader. This jolt is intentional. Byatt's text stresses the difficulty of reading the past and the sparsity of those properly equipped to undertake such an endeavor.

Nevertheless, she still believes that a poetic soul endowed with the capacity to feel and empathize can decipher the scribblings and emerge with a satisfactory sense of the past. This loss of poetic connection and empathy, in other words,

makes the past inaccessible to us. People such as Professor Cropper and Fergus Wolff never truly connect with the past. Roland and Maud were destined for the same fate, of course, until they dropped their postmodern pretenses and accepted their true romantic impulses. This novel's faith is founded on the belief that history can be narrativized and that an appropriate plot can be imposed upon the past in order to give it significance for the present. All three writers in this study plot their narratives in order to draw meaning from what they perceive as significant historical moments.

Byatt's text contends that a proper reading of the past necessarily leads to a proper emplotment. Roland and Maud succeed in drawing the truth from the past because they create a romantic plot that is *true* to the past, confirmed in large part by Christabel's voice from the past. To use Thiher's phrase, Byatt is, like the other two writers in this study, "seduced by the real." While Thiher suggests that contemporary writers suffer from history envy, because they perceive history's ability to reflect reality, one might propose that what compels these writers to write, with a combination of anxiety and narrative desire, is the conviction that literature can provide alternative means for accessing important truths about the past.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Dana Shiller's "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel."
- ² See Buxton (206), Kelly (78), and Shiller (552). Frederick Holmes frames historiographic metafiction as a "sub-species" of postmodernism to which *Possession* belongs. Byatt's novel, he contends, follows Hutcheon's stipulation that the text must exhibit a paradoxical relationship with the past: "The paradox exists in the way that such works create the illusion of immersing the reader in independently existing historical events only to undercut that experience by exposing the processes of artifice through which the illusion is created" (320).
- ³ Jackie Buxton sees Byatt as "using postmodernism - or at least post-structuralism - against itself" (213). Ivana Djordjevic puts forth a similar argument. Byatt should not be confused for a postmodernist, she warns, "and if she does deploy the entire paraphernalia of postmodernist technique and devices, this is in order to hoist postmodernism with its own petard" (46).
- ⁴ Franken suggests there is an underlying "sustained ambivalence" in Byatt's critical work, in her attitudes towards both poststructuralist and feminist theories, that is tied directly to Leavis's early influence on her. She argues that Byatt accounts for this ambivalence by dividing herself into two distinct entities: Byatt as critic and Byatt as writer. What the critic can uphold and condone makes the writer uncomfortable (*Turtle* 203).
- ⁵ See also Byatt's *On Histories and Stories* (79).
- ⁶ A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000): 3. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, cited as *BT*.
- ⁷ In his reading of the novel, Janik sees the quest for knowledge as having "life-changing consequences for those characters who have the capacity to open themselves to history" (163-4).

⁸ A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (New York: Vintage, 1990): 290. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, cited as *P*.

⁹ See Buxton: "Blackadder's subjectivity is so inextricable from that of his subject that even he questions his own originality" (209).

¹⁰ Richard Todd argues a similar point when he suggests that "Precipice-Encurled" reflects Byatt's "strong dislike of biographical (mis-) appropriation" on the part of present-day critics (28). The targeted scholar of Byatt's story is not far removed from those encountered in *Possession*.

¹¹ Interestingly, Rita Felski calls attention to our disparagement of nineteenth-century modes of thought when she discusses divergent theories of history: "Clearly, our present imaginings of time differ markedly from nineteenth-century depictions of the purposeful unfolding of the laws of history. Yet in conceding the demise of Victorian evolutionism we do not negate, but rather affirm, our own sense of historicity, our recognition that certain assumptions and vocabularies are now no longer possible" (348). Any demonstration of dominance, of course, endorses theories of history as progress. And whatever conclusions we derive, Felski argues, should make us aware of the tenuous nature of our conclusions: "The distinction [between nineteenth and twentieth century theories of historicity] lies, perhaps, in the fact that we have become more aware of the speculative nature of our stories, and of their inevitable plurality, rather than in the fact that we have gone 'beyond' them" (348).

¹² In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks argues that the loss of a "sacred masterplot" in the nineteenth century lead to "narrative anxiety" and the creation of alternative plots that might fill this void. This absence of a communal narrative explains the nineteenth century's "obsession with questions of origin, evolution, progress, genealogy, its foregrounding of the historical narrative as par excellence the necessary mode of explanation and understanding" (6-7). But have these obsessions really changed? If we follow Lyotard's line of thinking, that the postmodern period is one characterized by an incredulity to metanarratives, then one might explain the recent fixation on history in literature as a product of this same anxiety. And while the nature of the anxiety may have changed, there appears to be a recourse to the same palliatives.

13 For a detailed discussion of how the theme of patriarchal repression and the recurrent hair symbolism tie the two plots together, see Djordjevic (59-67).

14 Djordjevic takes this idea further and sees the modern romance as a continuation of the nineteenth-century one: "It is hard not to see the story of Roland and Maud as a *ricorso* of that of Ash and Christabel, in which case we could read in *Possession* a love story with a delayed happy ending. In the world in which she lived, Christabel could not but act as she did. For the woman of the nineteen-nineties, however, the challenge of love seems worth taking up" (66-7).

15 See Clayton (42).

16 Kathleen Kelly explains Byatt's approach to fiction in the following manner: "Byatt reveals a nostalgia for the past (however illusory) in which novels had the power to teach and delight. At the same time, she is fully conscious of her own nostalgic desires yet holds fast to them as the only sane and ethical thing to do" (115).

17 Not coincidentally, Roland's transformation at the end of the novel occurs shortly after he has received three separate offers of employment from universities to which he has applied.

18 See Franken on Byatt's satirical depiction of Leonora (*Art* 89-90).

19 See Holmes (331).

20 Shiller argues that Byatt, "appears more interested in showing that even though we cannot accurately reproduce the past, there is much to be gained by trying, and a great deal to be learned and enjoyed from the traces we can decipher" (551). She later posits that "what matters more than the substance of the truth [for Byatt] is the *process* of truth-seeking" (556).

21 In this way, Roland and Maud closely resemble Quentin and Shreve, in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, whose simultaneous narration allows them to create a plausible sequence of events for the Sutpen saga.

22 Janik suggests that Maud and Roland are somehow inspired by their Victorian predecessors and "gradually open themselves to new emotional possibilities" (165).

23 See Jane Campbell on Byatt's change of Browning's punctuation (116-7).

24 Campbell identifies the scholar as having a real-life model, Michael Meredith, who wrote *More than Friend* (1985) an annotated collection of the Browning-Bronson correspondence (which contains the footnote that inspired the story).

25 Hayden White, for example, observes that "narrative strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time" (*Content* 11).

26 See Kenyon (54).

27 Buxton (208) and Hulbert (59) both make this observation.

28 Frederick Holmes suggests that "It is as if Byatt herself is now willing to stop 'fetishizing' the nineteenth-century documents, which she herself has fabricated in any event, and to imagine in a more direct, less inhibited way what it was like to be Ash and LaMotte" (332).

29 In a similar vein, Janik sees the Postscript as "a reminder that in what we call history there are infinitely many histories - known, unknown, discovered, invented, overlooked, or avoided" (166).

30 "In Ackroyd's case - and to an extent in my own - the genre of the ghost story is used as an embodiment of the relations between readers and writers, between the living words of dead men and the modern conjurers of their spirits" (*On Histories* 43).

31 In an essay on Browning, Byatt notes that "the desire to taste and see discarnate spirits was not at all unusual at the time. It was part of a whole shift of religious feeling . . . Spiritualism was the religion of a materialist age, in a simple sense, and also a more complicated one" (*Passions* 53).

32 Byatt speaks of finding inspiration for "Precipice-Encurled" and *The Conjugal Angel* in footnotes and the absence of information provided therein: "This is a professional extension of a normal reading process, in history or fiction, making a fuller, more vivid, more hypothetical narrative precisely around what we are not told" (*On Histories* 103).

33 See Bernard (37-8), Kelly (107), and Djordjevic (69).

34 See also Ash's epigraph that opens Chapter 2 (P 12) for similar sentiments.

35 Kathleen Kelly astutely points out, that Byatt "transfers her own comments about herself as a 'greedy reader' to Browning" and, as such, "Browning's meditations establish a genealogy for Byatt's own forays into fiction writing" (44).

36 In contrast, Richard Todd examines the connections between Ash and Browning and points to some ways in which Byatt and Browning differ in their respective approaches to history. He suggests that while Browning, particularly in *The Ring and the Book*, allows his various characters to speak for themselves, Byatt recognizes that her twentieth-century scholars are less "real" than that. Todd concludes that "Byatt has realized that it is not possible to create, in the late twentieth century, the kind of novel that she believes to be lurking behind Browning's poem" (26). Todd does not elaborate, however, on the reasons why such an endeavor is impossible at this particular time. And, as I think I have shown, Byatt does share the belief that her fiction can bring the past back to life albeit momentarily.

37 See Byatt's "Robert Browning: Fact, Fiction, Lies, Incarnation and Art" in *Passions of the Mind*, particularly 32-42. Interestingly, Byatt makes a connection with Tennyson's *In Memoriam* at the end of this section (41). One further detail worth noting, Michelet also makes an appearance in *Possession* (P 410).

38 Byatt uses the exact same words in discussing Browning's belief that figures from the past "were somehow speaking quite distinctively through him." One of the reasons she wrote *Possession*, she explains, is to examine the ways "in which the voices of the dead speak through the living" (*Interview* 79).

39 "Historiography tends to prove that the site of its production can encompass the past: it is an odd procedure that posits death, a breakage everywhere reiterated in discourse, and that yet denies loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge. A labor of death and a labor against death" (de Certeau 5).

40 See Bennington's "Demanding History" in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*.

41 For example, Chris Walsh, in maintaining his view that Byatt's text is postmodern, sees the novel as emphasizing the plural possibilities of reading: "*Possession*, in presenting the reader with so many different kinds and examples of reading (and misreading), draws attention to reading's infinite possibilities. It shows up restrictive, monologic, authoritarian, closed, coercive readings for what they are, and promotes an ideal that is the product of thoughtfulness - liberal, dialogic, democratic, open, pluralistic; it exposes *possessiveness*, and encourages *freedom* - the freedom to criticize, the freedom to interpret" (194).

CHAPTER 3

BLACK DOGS: IAN MCEWAN'S POST-HOLOCAUST ANXIETY

Post-Holocaust Anxiety and Living in a Post-Holocaust World

A version of Byatt's emphasis on "reading" - on apprehending the telltale signs from the past and synthesizing them successfully into a coherent narrative - emerges in the next novel I examine, Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*. Although this text is concerned with a more recent past than Byatt's novel, it also illuminates the process whereby the past is historicized in narrative. Unlike Byatt, though, McEwan does not presume to have the ability to speak for the past. Instead, the text provides versions of a seemingly unimportant event through varying perspectives in terms, most specifically, of what the event actually means. The novel highlights the struggle to impose meaning upon an event whose details are known and about which there appears to be little argument. And McEwan's narrator, Jeremy, does not demonstrate the same assuredness as Byatt's characters. In fact, he claims to be incapable at arriving at a conclusion. He does not attempt to synthesize the voices, but rather allows them to coexist. By implication, then, the truth is to be found in the interstices between the varying narrative constructions.

At the same time, however, the novel's conclusion implies the need to make a decision for oneself, not to live in indeterminacy but to choose that version of events that will lead to a greater communal good. McEwan's text emphasizes the construction of narrative as a means of establishing a moral framework by establishing connections between past and present, creating a context whereby the moral value of events can be endorsed or contested. As in Byatt's text, though, McEwan's characters seek to solve a mystery and to derive knowledge from their narratorial exercises. While Byatt's characters struggle to discover what happened McEwan's are more focused on the moral implications of the past - what it means ideologically in the world of ideas. And while Byatt's text exhibits a clear disenchantment with the present, McEwan's novel reveals an anxiety about the future, derived from an analysis of contemporary events that echo those that took place in the recent past.

The events depicted in *Black Dogs* reveal what might be termed "generalized post-Holocaust anxiety." The text is haunted by the dark truths the Holocaust tells us about ourselves. Living in a world where such things as the Holocaust occur appears pointless, and few viable solutions are open to us. McEwan's anxiety is compounded by the recognition that the lessons of the past, even if they are not forgotten - which is, of course, a constant danger - do not have the power to change the present or affect the future. In fact, he extends and transforms the idea that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it by showing that even remembrance fails to prevent a repetition of events.¹ In this

sense, McEwan is a writer who struggles with the tragic inevitability of the human condition, and with "a world that distresses [him] and makes [him] anxious" (Haffenden 173). From his perspective, the Holocaust is not an anomaly, but simply the most explicit expression of the evil that is an ever-present part of human nature.

A good portion of McEwan's fiction in fact works on the premise that a very thin line separates the majority of us from the dark individuals he presents. The acts of evil committed are "presented as things anyone could find him/herself involved in under the right (or wrong) circumstances" (Malcolm 17). In *Black Dogs*, he creates an elaborate system of connections and juxtapositions that serve to highlight the gap that separates innocent bystander from a Nazi commandant. McEwan offers his text in reply to those individuals who forthrightly state that they would have never taken part in such activities. Until one is placed in these right or wrong circumstances, one cannot be so categorical in predicting one's response. The extent of an individual's goodness is commensurate with the degree to which it has actually been tested. The occurrence of the Holocaust jeopardizes any assertion of innocence and in fact immediately invokes the possibility of complicity and guilt. In this case, one is most likely guilty until proven innocent.

The occurrence of these events dramatically affects the way we conceive of ourselves and our communities. No one would dispute that the victims and survivors of the Holocaust have had their conceptions of humanity irremediably

transformed. But Dominick LaCapra suggests that the trauma of the Holocaust may also have a disturbing effect on non-survivors, including those born after the events, because it "unsettles narcissistic investments and desired self-images, including - especially with respect to the Shoah - the image of Western civilization itself as the bastion of elevated values if not the high point in the evolution of humanity" (*History and Memory* 9). Much intellectual and philosophical effort has been expended in trying to repair this psychic damage. The trauma, as part of Europe's past, demands inclusion in any narrative of the development of the present. To incorporate the trauma within a narrative, however, is not necessarily to accept its painful truths. Narrative may also permit denial and forgetfulness. And any narrative, as writers on the Holocaust frequently point out, will often prove woefully inadequate in terms of recreating the trauma and easing the victim's pain. Narrative remains the only means for establishing a meaningful link, however arbitrary, between our past and our present.

This chapter investigates the tensions inherent in the construction of narratives and their unstable relationship with a traumatic past. One of the issues that will be addressed is the treatment of the Holocaust as a narrativized subject and the impulses that drive such an enterprise. Whose interests are being served in the process - those of the victims, the investigator, or both? Is the narrative merely a palliative for those who live in the present? And to what degree does it honestly speak to the painful truths disclosed by these events?

The narrative may be deployed to deny culpability or simply erase any connection between the present and the events that took place in the camps. I suggest that maintaining an objective attitude is imperative when examining our reasons and motives for invoking the Holocaust as a medium for the expression of ideas.

In *Black Dogs*, McEwan depicts the Holocaust as a global and irrecoverable loss of innocence. The novel serves as a moral indictment of the human propensities that lead to the Holocaust, perennial propensities still very much alive today. One of text's contentions is that Europe has still not recovered from those manifestations of evil. Europe, and the idea of Europe, is forever tainted by the unfolding of these events. The dogs symbolize the recurrence of that evil and its ever-present threat to any sense of European civility and stability. This idea finds explicit expression near the end of the novel. In recollecting the day that followed June's fateful encounter with the dogs, Bernard recalls their coming upon a woman mournfully watching a mason carving the names of her husband and two brothers at the base of a statue commemorating the war dead. This sight leads him to consider all the anguish and pain that the war has wrought on Europe. He thinks of the war as

a near infinity of private sorrows, as a boundless grief minutely subdivided without diminishment among individuals who covered the continent like dust, like spores whose separate identities would

remain unknown, and whose totality showed more sadness than any one could ever begin to comprehend.²

Bernard's image of a besmirched and tattered Europe makes plain that some mistakes can never really be put right. The past remains like a shroud covering all of Europe in a sadness and despair, as well as a newfound realization of what Geoffrey Hartman calls "the vulnerability of civilized life" (327). Bernard then proceeds to ask a question central to McEwan's novel: "what possible good could come of a Europe covered in this dust, these spores, when forgetting would be inhuman and dangerous, and remembering a constant torture?" (B 140). The question highlights a paradox that is central to any understanding of World War II and its after-effects. The question for McEwan can thus be expressed as follows: how does one find or create meaning in a world where such expression has been rendered senseless, bitterly laughable, by the events of the Holocaust? And, finally, when confronted with such a traumatic past, what other choices do we have?

The Holocaust and the End of History

Theodor Adorno has devoted a great deal of time contemplating these questions. His oft-cited remark that writing poetry after the Holocaust is barbaric has largely been interpreted as a categorical exclamation, despite his own attenuation of the statement in later writings. In *Negative Dialectics*, for example, Adorno makes the following contentious statement:

All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage. In restoring itself after the things that happened without resistance in its own countryside, culture has turned entirely into the ideology it had been potentially – had been ever since it presumed, in opposition to material existence, to inspire that existence with the light denied it by the separation of the mind from manual labor. Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be. (367)

Adorno's comment helps us to conceptualize the quagmire in which post-Holocaust culture finds itself. But his statement also reveals the dilemma that lies at the heart of any cultural expression at this moment in history. It is true that any self-critique may be an act of dissociation or exculpation for the events. But Adorno is not proposing the eradication of all cultural expression; he is advocating a radical revisioning of it in the face of its complicity with power structures and dominant ideologies. The challenge that Adorno proposes is how to say *yes* to culture without furthering barbarism. Since injustice is done to the victims if they are reduced to artifacts for our enlightenment – and injustice is done if we concede to the silence, refusing to ever address the atrocities directly – some new form of expression must be found that is not complicit with the old narratives.

This dilemma continues to confront those who attempt to make sense of the Holocaust and our post-war history. One part of us truly wants to know, but the other would rather not. All of the negatively inflected terms that are loosely bandied about when referring to the Holocaust - *unpresentable, unspeakable, unknowable, inconceivable* - are reflections of our own inability to accept the brutal reality. Geoffrey Hartman observes:

We want to say, "It is inconceivable," yet we know it was conceived and acted upon systematically. We continue to harbor, therefore, a sense of improbability, not because there is any doubt whatsoever about the Shoah as fact but because what was lived through, or what we have learned about, cannot be a part of us: the mind rejects it, casts it out - or it casts out the mind. We are forced to admit that something in human behavior is alien to us, yet that it could be species-related. (322)

McEwan seeks to touch that "alien" part of ourselves, something he has been doing since his earliest work. However, he approaches the topic of the Holocaust obliquely; he is keenly aware that any attempt to confront the atrocities directly can lead the writer to either stone-cold detachment or sheer sentimentality.

In essence, the challenge is to formulate new ways of thinking and speaking about ourselves. This new formulation requires the construction of a narrative that will allow us to accommodate this new perception while remaining true to

the facts. To paraphrase Langer, these narratives must not only make us *feel* better, they must help us to *see* better. But the occurrence of the Holocaust has also affected the way we can tell stories. Hartman argues that we need to rethink the manner in which we plot the history of Western civilization: "The rupture, then, involves story as well as history: the story of hell, of its representations. The unrepresentable has been presented. Before Auschwitz we were children in our imagination of evil; after Auschwitz we are no longer children" (333). In these sentences, Hartman also touches on the theme of innocence lost – something to which I will return. The Holocaust prevents us from ever being children again since we can never permit ourselves to view the world with the same naïveté and simplicity. For although the Nazis did not "win," they succeeded in changing things irrevocably and permanently altering our sense of a potentially positive and progressive future. Of course, one could argue that they simply revealed what should have been known all along. They wiped away any civilized pretense, any incognizance on the part of humanity in accepting the depths to which it could descend. In fact, some of the generalized guilt that assails Western civilization could be attributed to a feeling that we should have known better. Hartman touches on this when he concludes "not that the world has changed, but that we have changed as knowers" (333). In other words, we have always been capable of such horrors, but history allows us to become complacent and refuse to believe what our eyes are telling us.

The horrors of World War II present evidence enough as to why the past should not be ignored. Conversely, the Holocaust can be used as an example of precisely why the past *should* be ignored. The extent of the calamity makes it easy to disassociate oneself from it. Since we would never engage in such atrocities that past has nothing to do with us. One might extend the argument to suggest that the whole hypothesis of "the end of history" is an elaborate attempt to deny our connections with that very past. The hypothesis is in some ways a convenient one, particularly if one feels as though one is at a cultural, psychological, or social impasse or if one is seeking a way to disassociate oneself completely from the past. The novel contests this ability *not* to see. Our faculty for denial is too easily turned to, particularly when combined with our conviction that the past is past and we therefore have nothing to fear from it.

One method of establishing this separation is the formulation of a narrative that distinguishes one's present as entirely distinct from what came before. The narrative of the "end of history" or *post-histoire* places us in a period of time completely distinct from the historical process that lead to the cataclysm unleashed by the Third Reich. It is not surprising that the "end of history" narrative first gained currency in post-war Germany.³ Significantly, McEwan's novel should touches upon two historical moments in the twentieth century that are often pointed to as signaling the end of history: the Holocaust and the end of Communism symbolically represented in the fall of the Berlin Wall. The term *post-histoire* gained currency in Germany for the generation living after World

War II. Francis Fukuyama's now-famous essay, declaring the end of history, appeared as a response to the death of communism and to the unchallenged supremacy of a flawed capitalist system.

McEwan's use of these two moments has led some critics to depict him as a nihilist. But McEwan does not seek to corroborate the end of history narrative, rather he wants to examine our place in history in the light of these events. Since neither the Enlightenment nor Marxism proved itself to be the paradigm for an unproblematic future, we find ourselves groping for something that will give our lives meaning. It is this particular moment in history, constantly threatened by the resurgence of the past, that McEwan illuminates.

But the mere chronicling of our present condition is not sufficient for some critics. To do so without offering any practical political solutions is simply to acquiesce to the status quo and concede to the evils of this world. Marc Delrez, for example, reads *Black Dogs* as an endorsement of resignation since it offers no prescription for shaking ourselves free from the burden of the past. He describes McEwan's approach to evil in *Black Dogs* as an "escape into political innocence" (20). First, he criticizes the novel for the lack of discontent, and thus any overt critique, revealed in McEwan's overt refusal to judge the worthiness of his narrator. Second, Delrez sees a flaw in the turning-inward of the novel's characters who seek private rather than public solutions to the ills of this world. This action on the part of his characters is

a matter of philosophical necessity, perhaps of survival, in a postmodern age in which the old systems of value have ceased to command any credence; on the other hand, it can be argued that a novel such as *Black Dogs* fails to act upon its best insights because, as I suggest, it also includes a resigned awareness of its own forced complicity with evil. (19-20)

Delrez insists on seeing this "resigned awareness" as a flaw since it fails to initiate any kind of political change. But such a conclusion fails to recognize that the novel is not so much a prescription for action as a means of preparation in response to this new contemporary condition. Implicit in McEwan's work is an examination of the complacency and denial produced by our own inability, and indeed refusal, to turn inward and examine our own involvement in the current state of things. The text struggles against our urge to see the Holocaust as some end in itself, as a cataclysm that brought about a new age of which we are a part. Instead, he proposes that while the Holocaust may have altered our psychic makeup it has not, for all intents and purposes, transformed our brute reality. If anything, it has simply served to make us more aware of it. But an acceptance of complicity or of one's "Aryaness" (to use Martin Amis's term) does not mean condoning evil. Instead, it signals a critical awareness of the means by which we too could easily be implicated in the violence and horror.

McEwan's novel makes explicit the limited degree to which evil can be challenged and controlled in this world. Since evil is an intrinsic part of us, of

our essential humanity, it can never be eradicated. We can only forestall and attenuate it. We cannot prevent evil from taking place; we can only control the magnitude of its expression. The Holocaust has revealed to us the extreme depths to which we can descend. Prior to its occurrence, it was possible to fool ourselves into thinking that we could never sink so low. We now see all too clearly the absence of limits to our potential depravity and inhumanity.

The text presents this new-found awareness in a loss-of-innocence narrative, a trope that will be examined at further length later in this chapter. I examine the extent to which this loss engenders a certain degree of disbelief. A loss-of-innocence narrative is often based on the precept that this loss will lead to something better and that it has a pivotal role to play in making us more complete human beings. There are times, however, when we gain knowledge we would rather not have. The nature of this knowledge naturally leads to a state of denial, as we strive for explanations that will allow us to preserve our previous condition. This may apply somewhat to Bernard and June who ensconce themselves within their respective narratives. No such case can be made against Jeremy, however. While he maintains his indeterminate stance throughout his narrative, Jeremy's knowledge of evil and his own capacity for it allow him to transmute June's philosophy into something more than a personal agenda. Jeremy's admission, when confronted by the immensity of the camp at Majdanek, that his will turns towards a suspension of sympathy, reveals the persistent and ongoing threat of complacency and denial. No matter how strong

our willingness to empathize with the victims, their silence, as Lyotard notes, makes them harder to connect with than the Nazis themselves: "The shades of those whom had been refused not only life but also expression of the wrong done them by the Final Solution continue to wander in their indeterminacy" (*Differend* 56). The very commonality of survival links us with the perpetrators rather than the victims, as does the recognition that in such circumstances we, as fellow "Aryans," may in all likelihood become perpetrators rather than victims.

Delrez attributes this inability to empathize with the victims to McEwan's cultural positioning, and he associates him with other British non-Jewish novelists such as Amis and Ishiguro who choose the Holocaust as the subject for their novels. He sees contemporary British fiction as turning to the Holocaust "in a quest for spiritual adjustment to this most defeating landmark in world history" (20). The balance of priorities has been thrown askew, with these writers showing more concern for their respective abilities to "represent" after the Holocaust than in the truths revealed in the Holocaust itself. But the one does not necessarily exclude the other; we can have more than one crisis. It is horrific that the Holocaust happened, but it is also horrific that life can go on as though it had not. That British writers show more concern for the latter, rather than the former, is not altogether surprising, since complacency and denial impinge more upon the question of whether the Holocaust could happen again than whether it ever happened at all. That McEwan and these other British writers are seeking answers out of some degree of self-interest should not be held against them.

Knowledge of our Aryaness and our complicity with the perpetrators may at times be unbearable, but to read these novels as attempts to dissociate from the calamity is to do injustice to their moral standpoint. No such salvation awaits us.

McEwan's Narrative Desire and the Role of Fiction

Delrez's critique of *Black Dogs* touches upon a popular topic in Holocaust studies, the place of fiction in relation to these historical events. In effect, Delrez finally faults the novel for being too concerned with its own Europeaness. This focus causes the British writer to remain trapped in a vision of "the shipwreck of civilization." He argues for a new perspective that "would not restrict the scope to decline and sterility, or to hypocrisy and a self-seeking disengagement from the mess" (22). Is McEwan *really* condoning disengagement? I contend that this reading of the novel frames McEwan as too pessimistic and, consequently, politically and historically paralyzed. Condemning *Black Dogs* for being too European bears some similarity to the position put forth frequently that only survivors may create legitimate narratives from the events of the Holocaust. Typically, the charges leveled against writers who choose the Holocaust as a subject, particularly if they are non-survivors, are those of inaccuracy and inauthenticity. Either the writers have gotten the facts wrong, or they do not possess the necessary "credentials" to speak authoritatively on the subject. Sue Vice points to the "authority" that writers must possess when discussing the Holocaust: "readers are suspicious of the motives of outsiders, who might have

improper reasons for choosing this subject. These reasons could range from mere sensationalism to Holocaust revisionism" (4).⁴ The overriding assumption in this argument is that only those who experienced the event can accurately describe it and thus are the only ones who have the right to speak of it. Any other representation simply attempts to assuage the guilt of Europeans who collaborated, actively or passively, in the destruction of the Jews.

It seems evident that the motivations that drive Jewish writers and those that compel non-Jewish writers to tackle the Holocaust are going to be intrinsically different. The Holocaust threatened the eradication of the Jewish culture as a *whole*, whereas in the case of European culture it simply altered and transmuted our *concept* of it. As a result, one endeavor is perceived as *self-preservation*, the other as *justification*. One aspect of this distinction that needs to be addressed is the fact that non-Jewish writers are often immediately linked to the oppressors because of their cultural positioning. Any writing on the subject is, at the very least, perceived as an attempt to atone for the crimes of the Nazis, if not as a bid to explain and justify the events. Non-Jewish writers are often seen as acting out of self-interest rather than any real desire to right the wrongs committed. Their actions are interpreted as gestures of exculpation, doing what needs to be done in order to feel good about themselves and their cultures. This issue of cultural survivor-guilt is not an entirely fatuous one. In defending his choice of the Holocaust as a topic for his novel *Time's Arrow*, Martin Amis offers the following explanation:

I felt I was in a forest of taboos throughout writing this book. This is the most difficult and sensitive subject ever, I think, but I do believe, as a writer, that there are no No Entry signs. People say, legitimately in a way, what am I as an Aryan doing with this subject? But I'm writing not about the Jews. I'm writing about the perpetrators and they are my brothers, if you like. I feel a kind of responsibility in my Aryaness for what happened. That is my racial link with these events, not with the sufferers but with the perpetrators. (qtd. in Tredell 126-27)

A similar motivation seems to spur on Ian McEwan. As we shall see, an implicit acknowledgment of complicity and commonality with the perpetrators runs throughout the novel. The distinction needs to be made that assuaging one's guilt is not always a selfish gesture. Atonement can often be a preliminary to prevention since recognizing one's own culpability frequently precludes the possibility of the same act being committed twice.

While differences do exist, it would be a mistake to conceive of non-Jewish writers on the Holocaust as diametrically opposed to their Jewish counterparts. The majority of writers of either culture sincerely hope for the past never to repeat itself. There is also a common wish to reincorporate Jewish culture within European culture, to the extent that the Jewish contribution is recognized. And while those not directly involved in certain events are more likely to forget them, these events may nevertheless contain a great deal of significance for them. Not

being Jewish does not negate the fact that the horrors perpetuated at the camps resonate all over the world. The specter of the dark past still looms, raising fear and anxiety. So while McEwan concerns himself with how such things could happen, he is even more intent in preventing such things from ever happening again or, at least, as infrequently as is humanly possible. He is involved in consciousness-raising, or perhaps more appropriately consciousness-changing. Since old ways of approaching the problem failed to prevent its occurrence, we need to invent new ways.

Before proceeding, we might ask ourselves whether *Black Dogs* is a Holocaust novel. In the sense that it does not deal with events that occurred during the Holocaust (1934-1945), then it is not. However, if we consider that the Holocaust continues in spirit and that victims still remain, as do the families of these victims, we can read the novel as a representation of its after-effects. As such, the novel is not an evocation of what happened during the Holocaust, but of its dire aftermath. The black dogs are a product of the Holocaust and represent its lasting legacy. Like the spores of the millions of dead that blanket Europe, the dogs are part of a past that continues its affliction on the European present. The Holocaust set a dark and dangerous precedent; a moral line was crossed that engendered further incursions. The resurgence of extreme right-wing and fascist groups throughout Europe in the past two decades makes clear that evil traditions can be pursued as well as the good. The shadow of the Holocaust still looms darkly on the horizon. In an interview, McEwan made the connection

between the present and this dark past explicit: "Within six weeks of my finishing *Black Dogs*, the catastrophe of Yugoslavia began . . . If you asked me where the black dogs went, it's exactly there" (Grimes C25).

The text creates a collision between these recent events and our near-instinctive urge to see the historical past in a positive light. This idea seems particularly striking in the post-Holocaust era, when the need to keep painful memories alive is constantly emphasized. Human nature refuses to contemplate such dark truths about ourselves. The role of the writer, and one McEwan has readily adopted, is to face these truths unblinkingly and to examine our diverse methods to cope and make sense of the evil that exists in and around us. As Sara Horowitz argues, fiction blurs the boundaries between art and history allowing us to

think better or at least differently about the events of history. The point is not so much to learn the facts directly from the mouths of survivors as it is to break down the cognitive and emotional barriers that keep the past safely in the past for listeners, readers, and viewers. (7)

We must be made to feel the past, not simply think it. As Wendy Lesser explains, historical narrative must counteract our innate ease in forgetting:

Black Dogs proves to us what it set out to prove: that we can only by great effort and under special circumstances be made to fear a past that is over and done with; and that we are doomed – as

individuals, and as individuals in history – unless we can fear the past. We need to think about history, but we also need to feel it.

(44)

Along with history, fictional discourses, with all their inherent flaws in terms of veracity and verisimilitude, remain the best vehicles for revealing lived experiences and keeping the memories of the past alive. Like the work of W. G. Sebald, *Black Dogs* presents the effects of the Holocaust-trauma to examine how people come to terms with the dark knowledge that becomes their burden to carry.

McEwan eludes the charges raised against non-Jewish writers by creating an entirely fictional scenario, not presuming to speak for the victims and not representing historical places or people, as his disclaimer makes clear. By fabricating an episode with the black dogs that bridges the past and the present, he finds a symbolic way of discussing the dark continuity of European history. As Leak and Paizis point out, such a great deal has been written on the Holocaust that readers are wearing down from what they term "compassion fatigue" (3). Therefore, the challenge facing the writer who chooses the Holocaust as a subject is to discover a method for telling the story one more time by adding a new perspective to what is already known.

An unflinching look at our dark past is inevitably going to heighten the anxieties of the observer. We are not always adequately prepared for what the past can tell us about ourselves. Fear of these very anxieties may interfere in any

honest contemplation of the facts. But the historical text can serve as a stable medium through which to engage in such activities. LaCapra suggests that one of the reasons for studying "the history of the limit-case" is to "generate that anxiety in tolerable, nonparanoid doses so that one is in a better position to avoid or counteract deadly repetitions" (*History and Memory* 41). Perhaps the same observation can be applied to fiction since it allows us both to experience and observe things that would otherwise be outside our moral purview.

McEwan seeks a narrative that will place the past in perspective and allow him to achieve some measure of peace in a flawed and evil universe. He wants to understand the incomprehensible evil in the hopes that its contemplation will either attenuate it or, at the very least, prepare us for its resurgence. Through the Nazi agenda, the dialectic of the Enlightenment, civilization and its opposite barbarity was reversed in a strange twist of logic: civilization was used as the precept through which unspeakable acts of barbarity were committed. We feel compelled to find some way of reversing this perverted logic or of controlling it by understanding the forces that contributed to its making. This impulse is best satisfied through narrative that confers some kind of meaning upon past events and allows us to salvage an identity from the wreckage of the Enlightenment's dream. The construction of such a narrative is dependent upon an unflinching examination of the evils committed by humanity and those that lurk in the dark recesses of our own souls. But the acceptance of our complicity with something that happened in the past, and our possible involvement with something that

might occur in a hypothetical future, is not easily attained by the writer. He works arduously to create links that will make clear our connection to the Nazi past, our capacity for future evil, as well as our ability to overcome both.

A Continuum of Evil

By reanimating our sense of commonality with the past, McEwan strives to awaken us to the possibility of repetition in the future. In addition to the geographical sweep from England to France, Germany, and Poland, the constant shifting of periods and the novel's predominant concern with dates serves to blur the boundaries between past and present. David Malcolm observes that "Events have to be labeled with dates, marked out in time, as if the novel were a history and it were necessary to locate those events along a chronology" (142). *Black Dogs* consciously eschews linearity, working to convey the atmosphere that hangs over all of post-war Europe in different times and places. The text presents a series of correspondences, over time and over geography, linking us to the past and highlighting the possibility of its recurrence. That the narrator, Jeremy, does not tell his story in a linear fashion, except for Part IV, allows him to juxtapose events in such a manner that the reader begins to perceive correspondences that might otherwise be overlooked. His approach allows him to connect the quotidian with the extraordinary, the banal with the extreme - something the novel as a genre is uniquely equipped to do. McEwan's novel is a philosophical examination of what it means to live one's life in the aftermath of

such atrocity and inhumanity. These concerns may appear secondary to those of the true victims of the Holocaust, that living in a morally compromised world is still a far better fate than dying in concentration camps. Nonetheless, *Black Dogs* serves its purpose in making us consider the dangers inherent in disregarding the past simply because we are not directly connected to it.

The text outlines a continuum wherein minor acts of evil are connected with the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. This continuum forces both narrator and reader to recognize the extent to which we are not separate nor immune from the events of the past. Can we rightly say that we could never do the same? We may truthfully believe this, as much as we can believe anything, but we cannot know for sure. We have not been tested. To admit such things does not deny the horrors that were carried out and does not claim that victims and perpetrators are one and the same. It is an attempt to understand the complexities and paradoxes of the human spirit, and a struggle to identify aspects of ourselves that may be repressed and civilized, but never entirely eradicated. The Gestapo-trained dogs may strike us as an exaggeration and somehow anomalous, but they are part of a violent paradigm that is an undeniable characteristic of the twentieth century. The violence of the black dogs becomes a product of the same dynamic that spawns neo-Nazi skinheads *and* abusive husbands/fathers. This omnipresence of violence counterbalances the episodic and disjointed qualities of the text. Like the dogs, violence simply

awaits the opportunities to manifest itself and, as the novel emphasizes, those opportunities are plenty.

Encounters with violence are often formulated in McEwan's fiction as narratives in which innocence is finally confronted by the world's corruption. This dominant trope of the latter half of the twentieth century is best expressed through the experiences of children who come face to face with that corruption. On two occasions in *Black Dogs* children appear as innocents brutally preyed upon by violent adults. So while Jeremy may claim that his Preface has nothing to do with the story he is about to recount, the parallels are obvious in his childhood and adolescence, particularly the period after the death of his parents when he is eight. Eventually, his older sister Jean marries, and Jeremy lives with the couple and his younger niece, Sally. Harper and Jean have an abusive relationship, and Jeremy discovers later that Sally is its principal victim. Jeremy feels protective about what happens to his niece and guilty about how her life turns out. We learn later that as an adult Sally in turn gets involved in a series of abusive relationships. At that point in their lives, however, Jeremy and Sally are almost equally innocent. Jeremy claims that taking care of Sally, which he often had to do, "kept me civilized and away from my problems" (B x). He also believed in some way that he was protecting his niece from the brutalities of the world. This belief is, of course, part of Jeremy's own naïve perception:

Harper had a gift for violence. There were times when I looked uneasily at my sister's red cheek or swollen lip and thought of

obscure manly codes that required me to challenge my brother-in-law and defend her honor. But there were also times when I went into the kitchen and found Jean at the table reading a magazine and smoking while Harper stood at the kitchen sink, naked but for his purple jock strap, with half a dozen bright red weals across his buttocks, humbly washing the dishes. I was grateful to acknowledge that I was out of my depth, and I retreated to the big room and the games with Sally that I could understand. (*B* xxii)

Here Jeremy acknowledges his former innocence and his willingness to hide himself within it. This same innocence will prevent him from discovering that Sally is being abused as well: "I did not know then how adults can set about children, and perhaps I would not have wanted to know" (*B* xxii). This is Jeremy's first exposure to violence and the evil that men commit. On some level, there are few things worse than an adult brutalizing a defenseless child; on top of the physical harm is the eradication of an innocent state that can never be recovered.

The cycle of violence that swallows Sally up is repeated in various forms throughout the novel. The closest parallel is the incident in the French restaurant when Jeremy witnesses a French couple abusing and harassing their young son. The tattooed forearms of the father who slaps his boy across the face are meant to recall Harper's tattoos (*B* 103, xix). Throughout the novel, McEwan creates subtle connections between one episode and another so that eventually they are all

linked in a chain of memory and emotion. The way the couple sets upon their child, for example, clearly foreshadows the determination with which the dogs attack June. Jeremy observes that the couple "worked in evident harmony" (B 105), just as June notes that the dogs "seemed to be working together to some purpose" (B 120).

In much of McEwan's work, the reader feels tension, but often the moment still surges forth unexpectedly. Though we have so steeled ourselves, we are still taken off guard. Here the scene seems banal and peaceful enough and we may, as perhaps McEwan intends, drop our defenses. We are so intent on finally hearing the tale of the black dogs that we may look right past the evil in front of us. In this instance, the first sign of violence comes from the mother who, paradoxically, is pleasant-looking; Jeremy notes that "this disjunction between her behavior and her maternal appearance was sinister" (B 104). Again, the text warns us to beware of appearances and to understand that violence can erupt from the unlikeliest of sources, at the unlikeliest of times.

McEwan works hard in this scene to communicate a feeling of powerlessness in the face of domestic brutality. Everyone looks away, and Jeremy admits he would have left the restaurant if there had been somewhere else to eat in the village. Within a matter of minutes, however, the boy has been struck three times, the last time by the father whose "arm made an extravagant sweep across the table" and who "struck the boy's face with the back of his hand" (B 106). Such an overt display of violence in a public place becomes too much for Jeremy to

stand: "It was impossible, I thought I had not seen it - a strong man could not hit a child this way, with the unrestrained force of adult hatred" (B 106). The connection between the couple and the dogs is strengthened when Jeremy finally confronts the abusive father calling him an "animal" (B 107). As the only other man present in the restaurant, Jeremy must act. When he looks over at an older French woman, she nods "gravely" in his direction. At that point, he has a "brief ennobling sense of [him]self" which is quickly replaced by other emotions. McEwan complicates the web of innocence and guilt in the novel with Jeremy's physical battering of the abusive father. While some readers may feel that Jeremy's actions are justified and that his past with Sally has led him to this point, it soon becomes clear that he has crossed some line - this attack is beyond proportion to the crime. Jeremy acknowledges that "what I really had to confront was within me" and that he was restrained by the same words "usually spoken to dogs: *Ça suffit!*" (B 101). These are, of course, the exact same words June will use in defending herself against the black dogs (B 125). The French woman's interference leads to a realization on Jeremy's part: "Immediately I knew that the elation driving me had nothing to do with revenge and justice. Horrified with myself, I stepped back" (B 108). Jeremy does not identify the source of his elation, but it stems from a darker side - a rage and a potential for violence - that exists in all of us.

What the dogs and Jeremy have in common, at that moment, is an unrestrained sheer animality, devoid of any civilized pretense. Normally calm

and controlled, Jeremy lashes out angrily with a brutality that shocks us and may even surprise Jeremy. McEwan wants to erase any line we may have drawn between *them*, the perpetrators of evil, and *us*. The likelihood that the reader may identify with his narrator provides McEwan with the opportunity to stress our own capacity for such behavior. As Kiernan Ryan observes, McEwan's fiction illuminates our own struggle to submerge and ignore certain parts of ourselves: "What must be buried over and over again is our brute physicality, which explodes all pretence of transcendence by insisting that nothing but cultural illusions and accidents of evolution divide us from the most squalid life forms" (*Ian McEwan* 58). The incident raises the question as to whether violence is ever justified. Jeremy finds initial justification in his desire to prevent the abuse, but this has unleashed a violence only curtailed by the slimmest of civilized pretenses. The same can be said of the parents whose right to discipline permits them to mistreat eventually their child and of governments whose pursuit of some pure sense of national identity leads them to pursue ethnic cleansing.

The issue of justification for violence is raised earlier in the novel in what may appear initially as an innocuous incident. Early in their honeymoon in Southern France, June and Bernard find themselves waiting at a train station. Bernard, an amateur entomologist, spots a dragonfly he would like to add to his collection. Bernard admits to Jeremy that "They're not exactly rare but it was unusually large, a beauty" (*B* 53). Bernard manages to catch the insect and hands it to June

as he searches for his killing bottle. An argument ensues over whether Bernard should kill the dragonfly. Bernard argues on scientific grounds, seeing the death as justifiable when used for the advancement of knowledge. June, who is pregnant at the time, sees it as a violent act. As she puts it, "It's beautiful, therefore you want to kill it" (B 54). While June recognizes that she may be overreacting to the present situation, she sees this moment as indicative of a greater gap that separates her from Bernard. She sees his move to abstraction as life without emotion and finally connects it to his political views. In anger, June observes that "It wasn't the brotherhood of man that appealed to [Bernard] so much as the efficient organization of man. What [Bernard] wanted was a society as neat as a barracks, justified by scientific theories" (B 55). Bernard's ability to distance himself from his subject makes him more capable of destroying it, even if it is only a dragonfly.

The passage touches on the justifications made during the twentieth century in the quest for scientific knowledge and the applications of that science in the management of communities. June's accusations place Bernard along the same continuum as the Nazis who sought to use science to create a pure and ordered society. This application of abstract science was carried to extreme levels by Nazis who felt they had to cleanse their community of a certain number of "parasites." The killing of a few Jews was perfectly permissible in the light of the greater good accomplished for the Fatherland. Using this kind of logic,

practically any action can be rationalized. The survival of this philosophy is embodied by the neo-Nazi gang in the Berlin section of the novel.

Part II of the novel opens with Bernard and Jeremy travelling to Berlin in November 1989 to witness the dismantling of the Wall. McEwan depicts this event, lying at the heart of the novel, not only as a positive moment in European history but also as one containing potentially dreadful portents. It is inevitable that the reunification of Germany should raise fears in the hearts of a great many people who still remember the horrors committed by the Third Reich. Such fears are expressed in the novel by a taxi driver taking Bernard and Jeremy to the London airport, as well as a Turkish demonstrator who provocatively waves a red flag in the faces of those who have come to attend this historical moment. The latter is set upon by a group of neo-Nazi skinheads, and once more the connection with the dogs is made explicit. The thugs move in a pack and are the products of a perverse nationalistic rationale in the same way that the dogs are transformed into creatures of terror. Jeremy describes their "heads and tongues lolling in bemusement" at the sight of Bernard standing up to them (B 74).

What is most striking about the incident is that the demonstrator is attacked not for his communist sympathies but because he is an immigrant. "*Auslander raus*" (foreigners out), they yell as they prepare to attack (B 82). The onslaught of the skinheads is also presented as an extreme expression of something a number of people in the crowd are feeling. An old woman screams at the demonstrator and two businessmen take swipes at him as he parades by. And

while Jeremy senses disapproval of the neo-Nazis from the crowd, no one steps forward to help. Such inaction is a form of complicity and collaboration. Violence propagates itself not only through those who explicitly support it but also those who refuse to do anything against it out of fear, apathy, or even a sense of their own powerlessness. The fall of the Wall would seem to corroborate Bernard's convictions that this is a monumental victory for democracy. But the neo-Nazi mugging of the protester, with its racial overtones, suggests that progress has not really been made. As Jago Morrison points out, there is "a clear suggestion of historicization itself as a dissolution of meaning" (265). The symbolic and historic dismantling of the Wall is meant to signal an end, a past that is definitely past. The attack of the skinheads, however, with swastikas tattoos proudly displayed, makes clear that the past cannot be simply compartmentalized or even monumentalized. The very act of imbuing something with "historical" significance may deny its capacity to affect the present.⁵ Ironically, the concentration camp at Majdanek provides the most startling example of the mutability of history.

While in Poland with a cultural delegation in 1981, Jeremy meets his wife-to-be, Jenny, and he reluctantly agrees to accompany her on a visit to Majdanek, a camp near Lublin. Having been to Belsen three years earlier, he feels no need for another viewing: "One visit was a necessary education; a second was morbid" (*B* 86). Nevertheless, spurred no doubt by his attraction for Jenny, Jeremy finds

himself at the entrance to Majdanek in front of a sign that recounts the horrors that occurred there. They are both struck by an omission:

'No mention of the Jews. See? It still goes on. And it's official.'

Then she added, more to herself, 'The black dogs.'

These last words I ignored. As for the rest, even discounting the hyperbole, a residual truth was sufficient to transform Majdanek for me in an instant from a monument, an honorable civic defiance of oblivion, to a disease of the imagination and a living peril, a barely conscious connivance with evil. (B 87)

The sign fails to produce its desired emotion for instead of sadness Jeremy and Jenny experience outrage. Denial is expressed at the very place where innumerable horrors were committed in the name of Nazism and thousands of Jews lost their lives. Europe's refusal to accept its part in the programmatic extermination of the Jews is manifestly demonstrated. As Lyotard observes, the Jews remain an "unconscious anxiety" that Europe constantly seeks to extinguish. Rather than a commemoration of the dead, the camp becomes a symbol of that ongoing project. Zygmunt Bauman sees the Holocaust as a logical extension of the attempt to create a New Europe and that this project, in different guises, has not been abandoned (*Life* 199-200). The sign at Majdanek indicates either that goal is still (un)consciously being pursued, or there is a refusal to acknowledge the attempt's failure by simply negating the existence of the Jews.

Jenny's exclamation connects this unforgivable sin with the black dogs. And although he pays no attention, Jeremy has heard the first mention of the family lore that becomes the impetus for the writing of June's memoir. Even if nothing more than complacency, the absence of any mention of the Jews, that dark silence, is a threat to which we must attend. Indeed, one can read McEwan's text as an attempt to catalogue the various forms in which the "black dogs" continue to manifest themselves as well as the diverse responses these incidents elicit, or fail to elicit.

This sense of inaction, of refusing to step forward when evil announces itself, is most pronounced in one of the novel's unanswered questions: the Maire's story of the Gestapo dogs. The day after June is attacked by the dogs, she and Bernard are comforted by some of the people in the village. Talk soon turns to speculation on the presence of these dogs. During the war the village was part of a resistance network, but after a botched operation, the Gestapo descended upon it. The Germans used dogs to track down resisters. According to the Maire, however, the "real purpose" of these dogs was much more sinister: to torture and rape women.

In the wake of this assertion, a dispute ensues between the Maire and Mme. Auriac, the owner of the hotel where Bernard and June are lodging. She sees no good coming from telling June such a tale, and she declares that no one can prove that such a story is indeed true. The account of dogs trained to rape women, she implies, may simply be an example of further male perversion of an

already bleak tale, of men deriving some obscene joy from speculating on bestiality. Mme. Auriac believes it is sufficient outrage that the French woman, Danielle Bertrand, was raped by the Gestapo. Nevertheless, the story compounds June's conviction that the dogs are embodiments of evil. What purportedly happened to Mme. Bernard in 1944 could have happened to her in 1946. The evil engendered by the war lives on. And while our initial reaction, much like Mme. Auriac's, is to deny the veracity of the story, McEwan wants us to consider it. The crime's unspeakability correlates with the unspeakable things the Nazis did commit and our desire to wish such things away.

The existence of the story nevertheless raises some important questions. If the story is true, is it not crucial that the full measure of Nazi horror be revealed? It may be enough for us to believe that Danielle Bertrand was raped by men alone. The text puts in question the truth-value of relating such stories, whether their transmission adds anything to our historical knowledge. Such tales may, in some strange way, simply perpetuate the evil from which they emanate. Some things are perhaps better left unsaid. They are called unspeakable crimes for a reason. Their very mention may ultimately taint us all. Nevertheless, the text *does* mention them, and the Maire and Mme. Auriac argue over the "simple truth" of the story. Creating his story from hearsay, what others contend they saw, and what he heard happened also in Lyon and Paris, the Maire sticks to his tale of bestial rape. Mme. Auriac, however, believes she knows what is true since she was the only one in the village to befriend the victim. Bernard recalls later

that it was "impossible . . . not to believe her" (B 136). She accuses the Maire and his cronies of having concocted the story themselves as a means of exacting some measure of cruelty on an outsider they all disliked:

And when this terrible thing happened to her, did you help her against the Gestapo? No, you took their side. You added to her shame with this story, this evil story. All of you so willing to believe a couple of drunks. It gave you so much pleasure. More humiliation for Danielle. You couldn't stop talking about it. You drove that poor woman out of the village. (B 136-37)

If Mme. Auriac is right, the telling of this story is simply another example of the evil that lurks in the hearts of men to cause pain and nothing more. The irrational hostility, felt by the Maire and his men for Danielle, leads to a violence of its own. And that is, in essence, the crime of which Mme. Auriac accuses them. On some level, it suits their purpose, as the appearance of the skinheads does the businessmen in Berlin, to have the black dogs around. Thus we are not surprised to learn that, despite his promise to June, the dogs are never hunted down. And this, too, ultimately compounds June's tale of recurring evil.

The novel examines the ways various individuals cope with the existence of human evil embodied by the dogs, and reveals the existence of a wide range of possible reactions from ignorance to denial to acceptance. The existence of the dogs clearly places in doubt any concept of innocence we may wish to adopt for ourselves, forcing us to admit our very complicity in that existence. For though

it may appear that our innocence can be preserved, the text suggests that such maintenance may simply allow evil to proceed unabated. On the other hand, accepting the loss of one's innocence, inherently tied to one's goodness, is anxiety-provoking. The text presents the struggles and reactions of three individuals - June, Bernard, and later finally Jeremy - each formulating their own narrative as each copes with a particular manifestation of that very anxiety.

Loss of Innocence: Global and Personal

The Holocaust brought about a profound shift in Western civilization's sense of itself. It challenged the "identity" that Western civilization had constructed for itself over centuries, and in which it had so much invested. In the light of acts of atrocity carried out in the name of science, rationalism and order, we are obliged to rethink precisely what it means to be "enlightened." As Lawrence Langer observes, the Holocaust "still mocks the idea of civilization" (183). The sense that things have reached an impasse and that the original conception can never be recuperated is bound to elicit nihilistic preoccupations and overwhelming feelings of disenchantment. The contrast with life before the Fall is simply too drastic, too harsh to bear. What is needed to counteract this inevitable pessimism is a reconceptualization that does not deny the past but incorporates it into a new version of a Western self. If this is the "age of camps," Zygmunt Bauman contends, it is also by necessity the *age of revaluation* (*Life* 193).

The traumatic events in *Black Dogs* lead the characters to undergo precisely this kind of personal reevaluation. Bernard and June are thrown back upon their beliefs and find them wanting. McEwan presents this experience as a loss of innocence. The recurrent theme of loss in McEwan's fiction is often dramatized as a trauma rather than a positive step in the maturation process. The knowledge acquired through these experiences changes these individuals – when it doesn't kill them – and effectively cuts off any return to their pre-trauma condition. McEwan's fiction frequently contains the motif of the individual striving to recapture that lost innocence and the bliss once conferred by ignorance.⁶ In all of these cases, however, the futility of such a quest is apparent and psychic survival depends upon an incorporation of the trauma into a new conception of self.

This maneuver, however, is not so easily effected since it requires the assimilating of characteristics that are alien to one's previous conception of self as well as coming to terms with what may be repulsive aspects of one's personality. As Steven Cohan observes, "a consciousness of lost innocence – of imperfection and corruption and, hence, of guilt – frequently underlies the accomplishment of maturity" (6). This accomplishment is usually brought about through the construction of a narrative that formulates potentially positive outcomes from an otherwise horrible event, and the Holocaust is no exception in this regard. In order not to feel entirely alienated from one's previous conception of self, the individual must create a narrative that accounts for it as well as the most recent

changes induced by the trauma. Cohan contends that historically the English novel has presented a series of characters "who struggle for selfhood in a world that assaults and yet encourages their egoism, and whose experience leads them to growth and knowledge, to comprehension of and integration with the world beyond the self" (2). But the knowledge gained may serve to awaken in the individual a sense of the flawed status of the world and self. The individual faces the challenge of integrating this new-found awareness within a conception of self, a constructed identity. *Black Dogs* presents two distinct responses to this dilemma.

In order to communicate the global loss of innocence on a more immediate and personal level, McEwan uses Bernard and June as overarching symbols of pre- and post-Holocaust Europe. They serve to bridge the gap between the two worlds and reflect the changes brought about by Europe's catastrophic history.⁷ McEwan's characters confront questions that assail post-Holocaust Europe. They ponder whether the death of innocence signals an end to Western idealism and whether they can lead meaningful lives now that their existences have been diminished by this barbarous history. Since neither Bernard nor June is Jewish, or a direct victim of the Nazi terror, they are more accurately symbols of the survivor-guilt experienced by other Westerners after the horrific revelations of 1945-46. On a more significant level, they are representative of the global and personal revaluation that these events engendered. Through the vastly different

paths they pursue, rationalism and spiritualism, the text highlights some of the options available to post-war Europe.

The narratives constructed to account for the existence of the black dogs include both personal explanations as well as political and communal contextualizations. Their appearance elicits a cognitive restructuring of self *and* world. While Bernard and June struggle to come to terms with their personal crises, the enveloping narrative of Jeremy's memoir attempts to place their dispute within the larger European context. Thus individual loss of innocence is framed within a larger communal loss. In order for McEwan to communicate the extent of the transformation, he must give some sense of the world that existed before. This raises an interesting dilemma since both McEwan and his narrator are born after the war. Therefore, their knowledge of that time will necessarily be historical. This struggle to recover a prelapsarian world, at least imaginatively, is seen plainly in the opening pages of the novel. Part I opens with an image of Bernard and June shortly before the latter's encounter with evil. Jeremy describes a photograph that sits on June's bedside trunk-locker at the nursing home. Taken on the eve of their honeymoon in 1946, it seems to capture all the optimism of the age: "The world is new and at peace, fascism has been the irrefutable evidence of capitalism's terminal crisis, the benign revolution is at hand, and they are young, just married, and in love" (B 5). The present tense works to add hopefulness to the passage; McEwan works hard to place the reader briefly in a moment when that hope felt real. The words suggest that the

past can be put aside for a new tomorrow. Not coincidentally, the picture was taken the morning Bernard and June joined the Communist Party of Great Britain. The couple's involvement with communism is a significant element in the novel. Their respective responses to communism's promises, both kept and broken, reveal varying degrees of ignorance. Hindsight interprets these communist affiliations as either naïve, idealist, or futile. In order to grasp the full significance of the events that take place in the novel Jeremy must try to imagine living in that particular historical moment. If we are to extract as much meaning as we can from the couple's story, something Jeremy certainly intends to do, we must grasp the political and social conditions that fostered the innocence as well as the consequent responses to its loss.

When we examine Jeremy's narration, the degree of effort he invests in his project is commensurate with his desire to know what it was like to live in a world where the Holocaust had not yet happened. Returning his gaze to the photograph of young June in 1946, Jeremy observes:

It was the innocence that was so appealing, not only of the girl, or the couple, but of the time itself; even the blurred shoulder and head of a suited passerby had a naive, unknowing quality, as did a frog-eyed saloon car parked in a street of premodern emptiness. The innocent time! Tens of millions dead, Europe in ruins, the extermination camps still a news story, not yet our universal reference point of human depravity. (B 14-5)

The passage touches on the altering effects of the dark knowledge Western civilization continues to inhabit. Knowledge of the Holocaust was an awakening, a sowing of seeds of knowledge that we may have already possessed but that, once shown the light of day, changed the world irrevocably. In fact, the last sentence might read, "not yet our *new* universal reference point of human depravity." This passage also reveals a desire to make the Holocaust unhappen, to return to a less skeptical time in human history. Here, the "naive, unknowing quality" of this premodern time is something to be envied not faulted, as the exclamation mark emphasizes. This is the impetus for Jeremy's memoir and, of course, McEwan's novel. As Jeremy notes, his motivation for writing the memoir is "to commune with the optimism of [Bernard and June's] generation" (B 100).

But there is also an ambivalence towards this innocence that runs throughout the novel for it is something to be cherished and feared. For instance, Jeremy's description of the photograph establishes that June has been irrevocably altered by the incident. Bernard, on the other hand, remains remarkably unchanged: "the essential man, the astonishing apparition, was the same clumsy beaming giant in 1946 as in 1989, when he asked me to take him to Berlin" (B 3). Only June truly "loses" her political faith. Typically, a loss of confidence carries negative connotations – because something has been "lost." In this case, however, June is the one who changes, develops, and adapts to the new circumstances. Bernard remains on his chosen political path and, one could say, nimbly preserves his innocence. Later at the *bergerie* when Jeremy carries on a

dialogue with them in his head, this is exactly what June observes: "It's Bernard's innocence that's precisely the measure of his evil. You were in Berlin, Jeremy. Look at the damage he and his kind have done in the name of progress" (B 96). The implication is clear that change is a necessary thing. The danger resides in confident men like Bernard who refuse to see the annihilation to which their beliefs may lead.

Looking at the photograph once more, Jeremy states, "I felt something like nostalgia for the brief, remote time when Bernard and June had been lovingly, uncomplicatedly together. Before the fall" (B 22). These last three words are, of course, loaded with meaning, both secular and religious. The words remain ambiguous, but in this context we should see it as the irreparable separation of the couple brought about by June's face-to-face encounter with evil. On a more general level, *the fall* refers to an irremediable shift in knowledge, an awareness that civilization is not slowly moving forward but stands on a precipice and may at any moment be sent hurtling towards barbarity.

Bernard and June respond in dramatically different ways to their historical experiences, and the novel becomes an examination of their contesting narratives and their viability in a post-Holocaust world. Each strives to make sense of his or her world by constructing a narrative that will satisfyingly account for lost innocence, both personal and communal. At the same time, these narratives serve to assuage the fear of further assaults by conceptualizing events in such a way that they contribute to the individual's sense of progress and development.

As Steven Cohan observes, the fear elicited by the initial event is diminished through a narrative that allows the individual to exercise some control over it as well as to place it in a context wherein its negative capabilities are transmuted. Frequently, this is accomplished through a communication of the knowledge acquired through the experience from which the individual has eventually profited. Cohan notes that typically the novel "invests the loss of innocence with the virtue of insight in order to envision maturity repairing that necessary violation of innocence" (19). Thus, Jeremy's narrative examines the extent to which the violation has been mitigated and has been fully accepted. Despite her recurring and horrifying dreams about the dogs, June credits their existence with altering her life in the most profound and positive ways. And while Jeremy's initial impulse seems to reconcile these dialectical viewpoints, we come away from *Black Dogs* with the sense that the difficulty has been compounded rather than solved.

Before turning to examine these narratives, we need to examine the role of the moment in McEwan's fiction and in *Black Dogs* in particular. Much of McEwan's fiction concerns itself with a particular moment, often one of horror in which the individual's life is irrevocably transformed. Its emotional and visceral impact forces readers to remember it as a salient element of the texts. The moment often serves as the impetus for characters to reassess the narratives they tell about the world and themselves. McEwan sees these moments as ultimately unimportant in themselves. What is significant for him is "how characters

survive, or are shaped by, their destinies" (Kaplan). The moment in *Black Dogs* is June's encounter with the dogs while hiking in the south of France in 1946.

Among June's family, Jeremy observes, the tale has been recounted so often that it has taken on mythic proportions becoming "family lore, a story burnished with repetition, no longer remembered so much as incanted, like a prayer got by heart" (B 26). The moment has taken on mythic significance over the years in the family saga of the Tremaines. The encounter, June tells Jeremy, "was to be the centerpiece of [his] memoir, just as it was her own story of her life – the defining moment, the experience that redirected, the revealed truth by whose light all previous conclusions had to be rethought" (B 27). The moment brings about an epiphany in which things are suddenly made clear, when innocence turns to experience.

In the case of McEwan's fiction, however, the horrific nature of the moment means that any attempt at its assimilation is inherently problematic. Is the mere gaining of experience sufficient to transform a negative event into a positive one? And is that particular reading of the event a truthful one, or has the event simply been rendered palatable through its incorporation into a transcendent narrative? This becomes one of the areas of contention between June and Bernard. While she sees the dogs as eventually bringing her redemption, he interprets that formulation as nothing more than "consoling magic" (B 57). Jeremy expresses his own skepticism about the significance attributed to such defining moments:

Turning points are the inventions of storytellers and dramatists, a necessary mechanism when a life is reduced to, traduced by a plot, when a morality must be distilled from a sequence of actions, when an audience must be sent home with something unforgettable to mark a character's growth. Seeing the light, the moment of truth, the turning point - surely we borrow from Hollywood or the Bible to make retroactive sense of an overcrowded memory. (B 27)

Jeremy highlights the retrospective quality of the activity, the choosing of relevant details to construct a coherent narrative. Bernard and June actually disagree as to the importance that should be attributed to the event in terms of explaining June's evolution. At the same time, this is a familiar McEwan device - criticize a particular approach and then use it nonetheless. He is himself a writerly master of the turning point, constantly placing his characters in situations that force them to rethink entirely their way of being.

In the case of McEwan's novel, the question is not whether the dogs existed but what precisely their existence represents. In answering this question Bernard and June reveal the incompatibility of their world-views and the impossibility of living together despite the love they obviously have for one another. The dilemmas confronted by the characters of *Black Dogs* mirror those of post-War Western civilization. The inability to explain away the evil that has befallen them gives rise to competing narratives as each individual strives to find an understanding that will relieve the fears. McEwan's couples often embody

dialectical positions to these ontological and epistemological questions. He uses Bernard and June to dramatize a philosophical debate that has raged throughout the twentieth century and into the new one. Jeremy presents that conflict almost too schematically: "Rationalist and mystic, commissar and yogi, joiner and abstainer, scientist and intuitionist, Bernard and June are the extremities, the twin poles along whose slippery axis my own unbelief slithers and never comes to rest" (*B* xxiii). Bernard and June become representatives of two dying master-narratives that have no easy and automatic place in the post-War world. It is up to a "postmodern orphan," as Richard Pedot labels Jeremy, to make sense of the void left by the absence of these controlling structures (71).

Competing Narratives

The polarization of the two tellers highlights the degree to which elements of the past can be molded to fit a particular narrative. Bernard's rationalism and June's mysticism impose meaning and force events into specific structures of meaning. McEwan's own narrative highlights the degree to which knowledge of *what really happened* remains an elusive and irretrievable thing. Instead, he proposes to examine the ways the poetic imagination can be used to *construct* rather than *discover* the truth of the past. In contrast to the monological perspective presented by the historical text, an example of which he offers us in the final part of the novel, McEwan provides a dialogical representation of our complex relationship with the past. While some critics have argued that

McEwan's presentation is too schematic⁸, the voices in the novel do not remain distinct entities but are dialogized by their exposure to each other. The text reconfigures the past by offering contrasting and sometimes opposing versions, thus contesting the view of history as a closed interpretive field that yields only one account of what really took place.

The first three parts of the novel provide the reader with information and perspectives in a distinctly disjointed and unlinear fashion. The reader assumes the same position as Jeremy, trying to untangle historical truth from personal motivation and flawed memory. But the reader is confronted with a second challenge since this questioning of narrative applies to the reliability of Jeremy's construction as well. Early in his Preface, he distances himself from them by asserting his general lack of belief or conviction. This quality provides him with the indifference necessary for faithfully reproducing an objective version of the past. In contrast to Bernard and June, Jeremy asserts:

I had no attachments, I believed in nothing. It was not that I was a doubter, or that I had armed myself with the useful skepticism of a rational curiosity, or that I saw all arguments from all sides; there was simply no good cause, no enduring principle, no fundamental idea with which I could identify, no transcendent entity whose existence I could truthfully, passionately, or quietly assert. (*B* xxiv)

At times, Jeremy seems unsure how his exposure to the story of the black dogs has changed him. Though he claims that the opposing positions simply canceled

each other out and that he was left with nothing, the tone at the novel's end suggests that he finally possesses certain beliefs he is willing to stand by.

Jeremy's writing of the memoir reveals a conviction that some truth can be extracted from this historical tale. The bringing together of these various positions, ordered and presented by a controlling consciousness, suggests that some order can be established, albeit conditionally, and that some approximation of historical truth is to be intuited in the interplay of these voices, including those of Jeremy and the implied author.

The novel thus fluctuates paradoxically between asserting that a truth can be told and pronouncing that very impossibility. So while Jeremy's narration in Part IV may create the illusion that things can be put in perspective, the competing narratives underline the contingency of any historical knowledge, that there will always be more than one version of the events. Since Jeremy's "memoir" is just one construction among others, we are likely to be wary of any objectivity he might profess. The writing of the narrative is elicited by personal motives and urgings, and far from offering a transparent account of events in the past, the text concerns itself more with the methods used to gather and present the information. As a historian, Jeremy cannot help but have his text dialogized and transmuted by his subjects. For although he controls his narrative, chooses the words and the order in which episodes will be presented, his subjects often exercise a good deal of control over him. After all, they are more or less surrogate parents. At one point, for example, Jeremy voices the suspicion that

June might be using him as "a medium for the final fix [she] wanted to put on her life" (B 17). Each of the three "narrators," then, seeks to satisfy personal narratorial urges, imposing particular interpretations on the past.

The very structure of *Black Dogs* heightens our awareness of history as a construct. The debate that propels the novel forward constantly reiterates the problematic and relativistic nature of any historiographic endeavor. In refuting June's version of events, for example, Bernard points to her changing the facts to suit her hypothesis. At one point he questions her particularly romantic account of their "first time" together and accuses her of bending the truth to her purpose: "What was she doing, making that up? Cooking the books, that's what! Our first time was a disaster, a complete bloody disaster. She's rewritten it for the official version. It's the airbrush all over again" (B 63). Bernard's allusion to the Stalinist tactic of airbrushing undesirable people out of photographs will not be lost on most readers. Once again, we are given evidence of the unreliability of memory and of the manipulation of the past to justify a particular present. As for her encounter, Bernard finds fault with his wife's mystical rendering of history; the dogs were only dogs until June turned them into emissaries from hell. She had decided the trajectory of her life beforehand, so they merely played a role in helping her to affirm her decision:

My wife might have been interested in poetic truth, or spiritual truth, or her own private truth, but she didn't give a damn for *truth*, for the facts, for the kind of truth that two people could recognize

independently of each other. She made patterns, she invented myths. Then she made the facts fit them. (B 63-4)

Naturally Bernard, the rational political scientist, finds fault with such an unscientific approach. He suggests to Jeremy that that is what his memoir should be about: "Here's your subject - how people like June bend facts to fit their ideas instead of the other way around. Why do people do that? Why do they go on doing it?" (B 64). Yet moments later, Bernard answers his own question. Coming to June's defense, Jeremy questions his father-in-law on his prolonged membership in the communist party: "But you stayed in the party ten years. You must have bent an awful lot of facts yourself to manage that" (B 65). Instead of defending his political resolve, Bernard acknowledges that he allowed his ideals to blind him to the facts. He admits the extent to which "our desires permeate our perceptions" and the degree to which his own best wishes for the future of the world prevented him from seeing the truth (B 67). Accepting his own relativist positioning, Bernard illuminates the limitations of pinning down the truth of the past.

That Bernard and June's dispute about the dogs remains largely unresolved points to the inadequacies of either interpretation and the possibility of a third, fourth, or fifth way of perceiving the incident. Having said this, the novel also makes it clear that we have little choice. Cognizant of the inherent limitations of any historical reconstruction, we still feel compelled to reconstruct. And this is particularly true when dealing with a traumatic experience. As Michael Roth

observes, the trauma "draws one to it even as it demands acknowledgment that one can never comprehend what happened there. A trauma is part of one's past that seems to demand inclusion in any narrative of the development of the present but that makes any narrative seem painfully inadequate" (205). The compulsion to relive the trauma can be attributed to a need to understand how it happened and a desire to prevent it from ever occurring again.

The encounter with the dogs could easily be seen as a meaningless and random event, so that June's narrative merely represents the search for self-comfort and the imposition of meaning upon the past. This is, more or less, Bernard's point of view. The connection of the dogs to the Gestapo, however, immediately invests them with historical significance. Since they are also linked to the camp at Majdanek through Jenny's aside, Jeremy's narration makes explicit the association between June's personal trauma and the larger cultural dislocation.⁹ The dangers that lurk in the past and threaten to reemerge at any moment finally necessitate some acknowledgment of history and our place in it.

But June's version of events is entirely antithetical to Bernard's rationalist philosophy: "You can forget all that nonsense about 'face to face with evil'," he tells Jeremy. As far as he is concerned, her interpretation is little more than "religious cant" (B 82). To demonstrate that June has incorporated whatever suited her purpose, he claims that he once told her of an expression Churchill used to describe his depressions - black dogs: "So June's idea was that if one dog was a personal depression, two were a kind of cultural depression, civilization's

worst moods. Not bad, really. I've often made use of it" (B 82). But if June and Bernard have made use of it, so has McEwan. The story becomes the controlling metaphor of the novel, blazoned in its very title. McEwan also sees the dogs as representations of "civilization's worst moods," and thus credence must be given to June's narrative. Seen from this angle, Bernard's objections carry little weight. The encounter with the dogs bears all the earmarks of a McEwan moment. It is a turning point. The dogs become the impetus for change in June's life; they exist as justification for the path she has chosen. That June is the only witness to the event, and the only one who suffers the trauma, is also significant. For while Jeremy or Bernard may easily turn them into abstractions, the dogs always remain all too real for June. As a product of the Nazi régime, they are part of the new landscape of evil. Like Bernard's dust of the millions dead, they exist in the disquieting aftermath of the World War II.

The day of June's encounter begins with her experiencing "a sourceless fear" and "a slight, nameless anxiety" (B 117). When she first catches sight of the creatures, she mistakes them for donkeys because of their "unnatural size" (B 119). The narrative communicates the other-worldly quality of these animals; they are dogs "only in outline. In size they resembled mythical beasts" (B 120). And there is a sense in which we can read June's recounting as an unwillingness to accept the randomness of the universe. For her, the dogs "emanated meaning" (B 120), and she must discover *what* they mean. She perceives them as working with a clear intent not driven by any natural motive. The implication is that

these dogs do not belong there – they are an abomination. And yet they move with clear purposefulness: "The silences that interrupted the growls suggested calculation. The animals had a plan" (B 125). The incongruity of this moment causes June to search for a suitable narrative that will make sense of this experience. The dogs exist as a kind of person-less evil, absolving their human masters of any inhumanity. For although they have been trained to brutalize, there is no one present to blame. The dogs are thus a perversion of nature, our "best friends" trained to kill and possibly rape. As such, the violence exhibited towards June is doubly unnatural for it is entirely man-made. June comes to see the attack of the malevolent dogs as something more than a random act of natural brutality carried out by starving animals. The dogs embody inexplicable evil, and this very inexplicability causes June to search for some inner resource. At this moment June has a spiritual experience and her life is changed forever:

She tried to find the space within her for the presence of God and thought she discerned the faintest of outlines, a significant emptiness she had never noticed before, at the back of the skull. It seemed to lift and flow upward and outward, streaming suddenly into an oval penumbra many feet high, an envelope of rippling energy, or, as she tried to explain it later, of 'colored invisible light' that surrounded her and contained her. If this was God, it was also, incontestably, herself. (B 125).

The dogs attack and June escapes serious injury by defending herself with a penknife. However, there is no obvious reason why the dogs suddenly abandoned their onslaught. She wounded one, but not seriously, and they had her at their mercy. The implication for June is that whatever she found within herself is the perfect countermeasure to the evil posed by these creatures. June never evinces any doubt as to what the dogs represent. For her, they are an embodiment of a "malign principle, a force in human affairs that periodically advances to dominate and destroy the lives of individuals or nations, then retreats to await the next occasion" (B xxv). This is one of the themes of the novel presented as a continuum of evil. What distinguishes June's experience, however, is at the moment of coming face to face with evil, she is also made aware of "a luminous countervailing spirit, benign and all-powerful, residing within and accessible to us all; perhaps not so much a step as a simultaneous recognition" (B xxv). Thus the attack from the black dogs elicits not only recognition of perennial evil, but also its antidote, the goodness that would appear to exist in all of us.

Kiernan Ryan argues that June's categorical way of perceiving the dogs allows her to construct the *yang* of goodness to go with the *yin* of evil. This maneuver, Ryan suggests, allows June to maintain the otherness of the dogs, creating distance between herself and the evil they represent: "Seeing the dogs as satanic is a blessing . . . since it leaves our centrality and dignity as humans intact. No wonder June grabs the rationalization with such alacrity" (67). We

might agree that June has merely used the black dogs as a pretext to achieve inner peace, but all narrative is created to appease this desire in some form or another. Bernard's rationalism is no more an acceptance of reality. Nor is, for that matter, Jeremy's ambivalence. They are all attempts to impose some sense of order on a chaotic reality.

Nevertheless, June's narrative may strike us as too Manichean in its neatness. Readers are likely to receive June's story with the same degree of skepticism as Bernard or Jeremy. At one point, Jeremy acknowledges that he is uncomfortable with the coherence of June's narrative: "The soul, an afterlife, a universe filled with meaning: it was the very comfort this glad-hearted believing gave that pained me; conviction and self-interest were too tightly entwined" (B 38). In June's narrative, her trauma is transformed, as negative becomes positive. She argues, in fact, that the experience has some redeeming value. The dogs are a catalyst that changed her life for the better and opened her eyes to her true path: "I haven't mythologized these animals. I've made use of them. They set me free. I discovered something" (B 36). We may agree, then, that June has simply found the means to frame her trauma in a positive light or that she has used it as justification for a life change she had already decided upon. But the text does corroborate June's version to a certain degree. She is right to fear the return of the dogs, for, as the novel shows us, the evil they embody continues to manifest itself in various forms throughout postwar Europe. Whether or not we are willing to accept June's spiritual vision as her saving grace, the fact remains that

the novel unabashedly asserts the power of the poetic imagination. Our ability to impose some kind of meaning, with all its tentativeness and limitations, still affords the potential to survive whatever evils may befall us, whether black dogs, Nazi skinheads, or abusive parents.

Her incessant return to the dogs, however, indicates that she has not incorporated their existence into her spiritual framework entirely to her satisfaction. The fact that the vision of the dogs always returns when she is in a state of half-sleep indicates that the post-traumatic aspects of her experience continue to plague her and that her narrative has only been marginally successful in repressing them from her memory:

It was in my notebook, the short, unvarying, presleep dream that had haunted her for forty years. Two dogs are running down a path into the gorge. The larger leaves a trail of blood, easily visible on the white stones. June knows that the mayor of a nearby village has not sent out his men to track the animals down. They descend into the shadow cast by the high cliffs, down into the thickets, and up the other side. She sees them again, across the gorge, heading into the mountains, and even though they are going far away from her, this is the moment of terror that jolts her; she knows they will return. (B 38)

June's constant revisiting of this moment may indicate her restlessness with her own inability to banish the vision once and for all.

At the same time, she is cognizant of the transmutation her trauma has undergone in the telling. This also accounts for the need to repeat, to convince someone else of the tale's validity, to make sure the story has been gotten right. The story of the black dogs is retold throughout the novel because there is an implicit fear that it can be forgotten and the experience can be lost to the past. Jeremy touches on this when he notes the symbolic quality of the dogs. Immediately he hears June's voice in his head saying, "No, you clot. Not symbolic! . . . Literal, anecdotal, true. Don't you know, I was nearly killed!" (B 6). And this is McEwan's challenge, too; he must make us believe that this canine apparition is more than just a metaphor. For it is necessary to make the evil actual, not hypothetical. This is, in part, the function of the continuum of evil constructed in the novel. We tend to underestimate both our ability *not* to see and our desire to repress. Too often we simply regard the past as a lesson, and having learned that lesson we no longer need concern ourselves with it. We all carry within us what Michael Roth calls "the illusion of the unforgettable" (204), the belief that some experiences are so extreme that they can never be forgotten. However, the very extremity of the experience can lead paradoxically to forgetfulness, since repression of that past may be the only way to survive in the present. And this mode of thinking prevents us from grasping what the past is really telling us – that the evil of the past will recur in the future, it is recurring now, and little can be done to prevent it.

The evil that produced so many past calamities is alive and well in the present and all it awaits is a propitious moment to strike again. *Black Dogs* stresses our blindness to this fact and our unfailing human faculty for putting the past behind us. And it achieves this, in part, by assuring our inability to connect confidently with June's story. June's experience is so unique, so personal, that there is very little chance of the reader identifying with her. That she is presented through the filter of Jeremy's narration only guarantees further distance, diminishing the possibility of learning June's intended lesson. Wendy Lesser contends that we do not "quite feel June's fear of absolute evil, nor do we fully absorb her revelation about absolute good. In that sense, *Black Dogs* is doomed to fail" (44). Like Jeremy, we struggle to believe what June believes and to derive the same meaning she does from her narrative. Having not undergone her experience, however, readers cannot share her obsession. Even if such empathy were possible, the novel suggests, it would not be enough to prevent the dogs' return.

The novel fails largely because part of its purpose is to highlight the impossibility of keeping the past constantly in the present and the inadequacy of such a gesture in preventing the recurrence of catastrophes. Lesser posits that

Black Dogs proves to us what it set out to prove: that we can only by great effort and under special circumstances be made to fear a past that is over and done with; and that we are doomed – as individuals, and as individuals in history – unless we can fear the

past. We need to think about history, but we also need to feel it.

(44)

While I agree with Lesser's observations, I would argue that McEwan's novel does not make the correlation between knowledge and prevention. McEwan accepts evil as an inherent part of humanity, but he also recognizes that awareness does not preclude future occurrences. What it may do is aid in the exercising of some self-control on the part of individuals who do not conceive of the extremes to which minor acts of evil can lead. And it may allow for countermeasures to be put in place more rapidly than in the past.

I interpret Lesser's notion of *feeling* history as our capacity to imagine ourselves in the past, to extract ourselves from our present supposedly "aware" position and empathize with our seemingly more naïve predecessors. Robert Taylor faults the novel for using a narrator who must "imagine the drama" and thus report it secondhand. But is this not what most historians do? In depicting Jeremy's struggles to render textually June's experience, the novel highlights our limitations for fully imagining the past - a deficiency that also prevents us from fully imagining the future. It can certainly be argued that Bernard, with all his common sense, *thinks* history rather than *feels* it. As Bernard himself admits, "Ideas were my thing" (B 52). He approaches June's story, and history itself, in a thoroughly logical and analytic manner. As a Labour MP he continues to evince faith in the practicality of political solutions, even in the light of great historical disillusionments. Through political and social reform society's ills can be cured,

and Bernard sees the dismantling of the Wall as confirmation of this belief. But the attack of the skinheads, with its implicit reference to a neo-Nazi resurgence in Europe, negates any sense of humane progress to which Bernard might wish to cling. And yet this is precisely what he continues to do. Such conviction in one's beliefs is not without its attractions, as Jeremy concedes: "He had a way of presenting all his opinions as well-established facts and his certainties did have a sinuous power" (B 50). Nevertheless, in a novel so focused on the limitations of knowledge, Bernard's certitude is likely to strike us, as it does Jeremy, as *too* certain, *too* unquestioning in its unequivocalness. If June can be accused of making the world bend to her narrative, Bernard can be held accountable for an unwillingness to see meaning anywhere.

For Bernard, any meaning we derive from the world is one that we have imposed upon it ourselves. June's story of the black dogs is therefore something she fabricated for practical and consoling reasons. Ever the pragmatic scientist, Bernard categorically refuses to give any credence to June's superstitions: "I tried hard to imagine what it would be like to believe, really to believe . . . And honestly, I couldn't. It was magical thinking, completely alien to me" (B 57). June's "magical thinking" invents a world in which there are counts and balances, where one's karma plays a significant part in how life turns out, and Bernard rejects it as nothing more than "consoling magic" and points to this belief as the thing that separates men and women. Using June as his example, Bernard

argues that women are irrational and uninterested in objective truth as he recognizes it.

Bernard lacks June's metaphorical bent, so he refuses to see the black dogs as anything more than hungry animals. Because they are the novel's guiding metaphor, Bernard's rationalism blinds him to the historical inevitability the dogs represent. He continues to believe stubbornly that we continue to progress and that these setbacks are only hiccoughs on the road to utopia. Still, it is difficult not to see Bernard as the more realistic of the two characters. Perhaps this explains why McEwan deliberately sabotages the validity of Bernard's point of view in the incident at the Wall. Arriving in Berlin, Bernard admits to Jeremy that shortly after June's death he gave in to superstition and looked for a sign from her:

I couldn't stop thinking that if the world by some impossible chance really was as she made it out to be, then she was bound to try and get in touch to tell me that I was wrong and that she was right - that there was a God, eternal life, a place where consciousness went. All that guff. And that she would do it somehow through a girl who looked like her. And one day one of these girls would come to me with a message. (B 61)

Bernard makes it clear to Jeremy that he eventually came to his senses and went back to looking at the world objectively as he had before. A few moments later, however, in the confrontation that ensues at the base of the Wall, Bernard is

rescued from the skinheads by a girl who bears some physical resemblance to June. When Jeremy points this fact out to him, Bernard, without looking at the girl, merely notes, "Yes. Quite a coincidence, I suppose" (B 77). His refusal even to consider the possibility of a scenario he himself had formerly constructed, demonstrates the extent of his inflexibility and his inability to change in the face of evidence.¹⁰ Bernard's lack of emotional capacity is likely to strike the reader as a greater deficiency than any component of June's mystical approach. In the end, the text presents a far more critical view of Bernard's stance. And there is some sense that this criticism is aimed at Bernard's gender as well as his philosophy, for indeed the two are inextricably entwined.

McEwan's anxiety is directly connected to history that is man-made and male-driven. The precarious position we now find ourselves in is largely the result of masculine ways of thinking. McEwan might feel guilty by gender-association, and he has turned to feminism from time to time for an alternate perspective. This has led him to be accused of appropriating feminist narratives for his own purposes.¹¹ But it seems to me that McEwan turns to feminist values as a way out of the impasse brought on by patriarchal positivism. His desire is not so much to replace one way of thinking with another as to break down the dominance of one discourse and allow for an interplay of voices. This explains the dialogic voices in the novel; each voice is tempered and qualified by the other. Nevertheless, the text suggests that the male voices of historical certitude need to be dialogized. Certainly a correlation can be made between this

dominance and the totalitarian nationalist philosophies that silenced millions of minority voices. McEwan's anxiety may also stem from the connection that is invariably made between rationalism, a male way of orderly thinking, and the systematic annihilation carried out by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Bernard's detachment – his suspension of sympathy necessary to function as a scientist – resembles the root of all monstrosity. As Ryan observes, there is "something arid and alienated about Bernard's masculine rationality – the detached, abstract gaze of the superior Cartesian self analysing and correcting the external world – which is plainly part of the problem" (B 63). So while Bernard's unemotional and objective stance may hold some allure in terms of getting at the truth of things, it soon becomes clear to Jeremy that it is not enough and, in fact, conceals many of the dangers with which his memoir is concerned. In the end, Jeremy prefers neither Bernard nor June's approach, but seeks some alternate possibility.

Jeremy's Narration: The Participant-Observer as Historian

Critics of the novel have focused largely on the philosophical debate between Bernard and June, often ignoring the role Jeremy plays in the representation of the two sides. While he is not a participant in the pivotal event of his narration, Jeremy nevertheless takes part in a good deal of the surrounding plot. In fact, it could be argued that only the final part of the novel really belongs to the couple and that the first three parts illuminate Jeremy's struggles to come to terms with truths that have plagued him, in one form or another, since childhood. But the

different narratives have a reciprocal effect. Jeremy's contact with the Tremaines gives a broader scope to the experiences recounted in the Preface, while the events of the text create a global context for June's narrative. Though both Bernard and June are aware of the evils of this world their respective positions permit them to maintain some distance, if not retreat altogether. Jeremy, on the other hand, is more directly implicated. He does not possess a philosophy as such, but seems at times more perceptive to the realities of the world.

Jeremy's inability to advocate one position or another represents one of the symptoms of the post-Holocaust condition. It is thus possible to see Jeremy, as Richard Pedot does, as a "postmodern orphan" who is left stranded not only by the deaths of his parents but also of any foundational philosophy by which he might valorize his life (71). Events of the twentieth century have exposed the limitations as well as the excesses of the master narratives leaving a metaphysical void in which most of us now conduct our lives. It is not surprising that Jeremy should exhibit an ambivalent attitude towards his project, because he very much casts himself as an individual without a cause. And yet the writing of the memoir implies a commitment to unearthing the truth behind June's story. Thus Jeremy embodies what Amy Elias sees as the paradoxical quality of the postmodern attitude toward history, one of "supplication and desire as well as . . . skepticism" (xvii). The novel's various narratives underline the impossibility of one truth. The text's episodic and fragmented form also highlights the discrepancies that prevent the amalgamation of the different narratorial strands

into one single coherent structure. None of these setbacks, however, can extinguish our inherent desire for meaning. The very existence of the written discourse undercuts any of Jeremy's disclaimers, proving that indifference is not an option. Harried by a number of doubts and contradictions, Jeremy nevertheless feels compelled to give the events a structure deriving some lesson from Europe's recent history. In this regard, McEwan's text¹² represents a certain strand of postmodern historiography: "For the postmodern, post-traumatic, metahistorical imagination, history is not knowledge we learn and 'own' once we learn it; rather . . . history is something we can't learn, something we can only desire" (Elias xviii). *Black Dogs* testifies to the fragmented nature of the post-War world and to our compulsion to make sense of those fragments.

But what kind of text is *Black Dogs* exactly? Although Jeremy constantly refers to writing a "memoir," it is more of a textual examination of the process by which a memoir might be written.¹³ And while it may be concerned with Bernard and June, the text is as much about Jeremy. June's encounter with the dogs is given additional resonance by the experiences undergone by Jeremy at the Berlin Wall, Majdanek, the French restaurant. These experiences often illuminate the extent to which the text becomes an exercise in self-examination, since complicity on Jeremy's part strengthens the link with the black dogs. So while June's story always risks being turned into abstraction, no such thing can happen to Jeremy's tale since the potential for evil exists not only in the external world but within himself. By having the French woman use the same words to

subdue Jeremy after the fistfight as June does with the dogs – "*Ça suffit*" – McEwan obliges us to view Jeremy as analogous to the dogs that are the subject of the text:

The encounter with the black dogs is also an encounter with one's self, the maleficent creature that exists within. Under these conditions, Jeremy, as black dog, becomes the subject, in the passive sense, of his own story, while his mastery of the narrative is simultaneously put in question by his becoming its active subject.

(Pedot 73 my translation).

Therefore, Jeremy's narration, even when most concerned with the irreconcilable differences in Bernard and June's marriage, is strongly motivated by a desire to discover what *he* truly believes, what these events mean to him, and how they impinge upon his sense of self.

Despite frequent self-referential comments on the part of Jeremy, the reader might still overlook the fact that literally all the information is processed through Jeremy's consciousness. Though his narrative is transformed by his subjects from time to time, he still exercises control over the manner and the deployment of narrative materials. A good example of the intimate relationship between chronicler and subject occurs halfway through Part III. Immediately following the trip to Berlin, Jeremy decides to visit June's *bergerie* that he and Jenny have inherited. Returning to this cold and unlit place near midnight, Jeremy is overcome by superstitious trepidation. He is convinced he feels the presence of

June's spirit: "some delicate emanation, a gossamer web of consciousness, inhaled and was aware of me" (B 91). Stumbling blindly around the dark interior, Jeremy's instinctive fear continues to grow. These feelings bear some similarity to those experienced by June on the morning of her fateful encounter. Finally finding the switchboard, he stands frozen, unable to flip the power switch: "I was trapped between my reason . . . and my supernatural dread" (B 93). Jeremy decides to first light a candle and discovers a large scorpion sitting on the handle, a sight that immediately gives credence to his fears.

The next day, reconsidering the events of the previous night, Jeremy hears the voices of June and Bernard debating in his head. June's voice confirms his superstitions and argues that it was her presence that protected him. That he should consider such an idea folly is too much for her: "[I]f you're prepared to go to such lengths to keep your skepticism intact, then you're an ingrate and I should never have put myself out for you. Rationalism is a blind faith, Jeremy, how can you ever hope to see?" (B 94-95). Bernard's voice, of course, offers a series of rational observations that logically explain everything that has happened. Bernard's is so much the voice of reason that he even points out to Jeremy that they are nothing more than voices in his head.

What is important to remember is that the voices belong to Jeremy; he has conjured them up because they represent the conflicting ideologies that coexist within him. His mind is like the text, literally placing in dialogue the opposing voices; they are not the voices of Bernard and June, but Jeremy's versions of

them. That he is able to recreate the speech of his in-laws testifies not only to his intimate knowledge of them, but also to the proximity of their beliefs to his own. Jeremy highlights the extent of the internal conflict when he notes, "If I listened, I learned nothing. Each proposition blocked the one before or was blocked by the one that followed. It was a self-canceling argument, a multiplication of zeros, and I could not make it stop" (B 97). The pessimism of the comment is disingenuous, since the existence of the text negates reducing this conflict to nothing. The ongoing nature of the debate suggests the relative validity of each position, which in turn explains Jeremy's inability simply to ignore it.

What precisely does Jeremy hope to accomplish in writing this memoir? On one level, his text is a remembrance of the Tremaines and, through them, of a world that no longer exists. Their "transitional" status, their bridging of the old world and the new, allows Jeremy to contemplate what has been lost and how things have changed in the ensuing years. On another level, the text is an attempt to make sense of what he has been told and what he has witnessed. Despite the many disclaimers, the act of writing the text implies a conviction that something can be gleaned from the past. In foregrounding the textuality of the novel, however, McEwan illuminates the tentative relationship between the historian and his sources, oral and textual. This "metamemoir" unveils the creative process and puts in relief the difficulties of the historian who wishes to translate memory into text. In essence, Jeremy is testifying for the Tremaines.

But as Dominick LaCapra points out, any kind of testimony poses special challenges for history:

For it raises the issue of the way in which the historian or other analyst becomes a secondary witness, undergoes a transference relation, and must work out an acceptable subject-position with respect to the witness and his or her testimony. Transference here implies the tendency to become emotionally implicated in the witness and his or her testimony with the inclination to act out an affective response to them. (*History and Memory* 11-12)

Such is the situation faced by Jeremy who must create "secondary memory."¹⁴ Jeremy's emotional implication in this story is apparent. His inability to let the story lie also indicates the degree to which he is invested in constructing this narrative.

The transmutation between primary and secondary memory is inevitable, even more so when the experience being transfigured is a traumatic one. In such circumstances, the probability of the chronicler remaining unemotional and objective is seriously compromised. Trauma automatically elicits certain emotional responses - indignation, empathy, sympathy, fear, death drive - that leads to the creation of a "tragic grid." According to LaCapra, we need to rethink this "tragic grid" in order to open new avenues for investigating the past. That a chronicler should feel passionate about his or her subject is a given (indeed, it is an implied requirement in the writing of any historical text). At the same time,

emotions immediately lock the chronicler into a certain position in relation to his or her subject. It is therefore necessary to work out the tensions between an entirely *feeling* reading of the past and an objective *unfeeling* one. Throughout the text, Jeremy struggles with his narration, seeking to balance his sympathies and his objections. Wavering between the two versions, Jeremy is unsettled by his own indeterminacy. A part of him knows he must choose a single account for himself, something he sets out to do in the writing of the memoir.

LaCapra questions the traditional positioning of the historian as innocent bystander within the tragic grid, for the assumption of such a role immediately precludes any direct involvement between the historian and his subject. Limit-cases are noteworthy, he argues, because the historian automatically appropriates the guise of "the resister with marked sympathy for the victim and antipathy for the perpetrator or collaborator" (*History and Memory* 41). Such a role is too comfortably embraced by someone who has not been tested by the limit-case in question. LaCapra advocates a rethinking of the grid in order to arrive at a "more desirable network of relations." Desirable perhaps from an academic perspective but hardly so on a personal one, the historian must demonstrate some connection with the perpetrator's position. We may subconsciously resist any understanding of the perpetrator because we fear what such understanding reveals about ourselves. There is also the danger that any comprehension of the perpetrator's actions will be misinterpreted as some kind of approval. Acquiescing to such fears, however, closes one off from a full

empathetic reading of the past. A vital component of the historiographic project must be the capacity to empathize with each participant in the drama. Our inability to recognize ourselves in the perpetrators more likely indicates insufficient insight on our parts than innocence or a higher moral standing. Recognition of commonality should not be interpreted as condoning the perpetrators' actions. Instead, this recognition may allow us to behave differently. Some degree of connection with our Other is necessary if only to guarantee a balanced perspective.

One significant difference between Jeremy's narrative and the accounts of the primary witnesses is an apparent recognition of a commonality with the perpetrators revealed in two key scenes in the novel. The presence of such insightfulness and empathy can only make Jeremy a better analyst.¹⁵ What makes Jeremy more than a simple narrator is that his contemporary experiences allow him to empathize on a deeper level while also respecting the terror of June's vision. Her warning about the recurrence of evil with the imminent return of the black dogs strikes a chord in the narrative because Jeremy exhibits an awareness of the black dogs that exist within him. His inclusion of the scene describing his beating of the abusive father and its eventual curtailment by the French woman ("*Ça suffit*") makes implicit his connection with the evil the dogs represent. In fact, he admits that initially this section of the memoir was not meant to contain this scene (B 101). Jeremy's need to include it alerts the reader that the focus of the text is as much Jeremy as it is the Tremaines. At that

moment Jeremy becomes directly linked to the other violent incidents in the text. He is part of the text's continuum of violence. The scene also contradicts Jeremy's early assertion in the Preface that his life with Sally has no connection to the narrative he is about to tell (B xxiii). Jeremy is not only victim, or only observer, he is also participant. This range of roles, as well as his own acceptance of them, permits him to give a more complete recounting of events. Jeremy's realization that he "might have kicked and stomped [the abusive father] to death" (B 108), prevents him from maintaining any moral distance between himself and the events in the memoir. Such awareness may even serve to explain some of the reasons behind the actual writing of the memoir. The "elation" felt by Jeremy as he nearly beats a man to death unveils his own capacity for violence and rage. An appreciation of this potential is something that McEwan wishes to instill in all his readers, for it may be the only antidote to the global dangers implied in the impending return of the dogs.

The range of emotions Jeremy undergoes on his visit to Majdanek reveals the multiplicity of perspectives that he brings unconsciously to the various circumstances with which he is confronted in the novel. The majority of critics examining this moment in the text have noted only the outrage Jeremy feels at the exclusion of any mention of the Jews at the gate of the camp and the implicit refusal of communal guilt such an omission entails. But he feels a number of conflicting emotions and thoughts not necessarily resolvable. And he constantly notes the unbridgeable gap that exists between the unfolding present and the

fixed realities of the past. For example, he immediately notes the camp's "obsessive neatness," a sharp contrast to the bloody deeds that were carried out in this place (88). Like the omission on the sign, the disparity underlines the mutability of time that prevents the historical monument from communicating accurately the truths of the past. For while some physical structures remain, they do not possess the power to communicate the hellish nightmare that was the daily life of the camp. In fact, the pristine setting, made even more so by the fallen snow, is an entirely inaccurate representation that imposes itself upon the mind of the observer. It places the onus on the observer to construct what he believes is an accurate likeness of the unfathomable perversion that was Majdanek. The gap between present and past begins to lengthen when the observer recognizes the limits of his capacity to connect with something that defies the imagination.

Here the text touches on the all-encompassing silence of the victims; their absence is a palpable thing that cannot be represented. On first being confronted by the sight of thousands of abandoned shoes, for example, Jeremy feels himself overwhelmed: "Life turned to tat. The extravagant numerical scale, the easy-to-say numbers - tens and hundreds of thousands, millions - denied the imagination its proper sympathies, its rightful grasp of the suffering" (B 88). The text acknowledges that the horror of the Holocaust cannot be encompassed in its monstrous entirety. This failure of the imagination, however, also leaves us open to a diminishment of understanding. Jeremy notes that this cruel

depersonalization draws one "insidiously to the persecutor's premise, that life was cheap, junk to be inspected in heaps" (B 88). A ghastly inversion, when shoes represent death rather than living, pushes the observer close to the precipice of nihilism. So many lives reduced to so very little reveals our insignificance, knowledge compounded by the human participation in that annihilation. Jeremy expresses both the powerlessness felt in the presence of such immense horror and the inevitable guilt experienced by survivors: "Either you came here and despaired, or you put your hands deeper into your pockets and gripped your warm loose change and found that you had taken one step closer to the dreamers of the nightmare. This was our inevitable shame, our share in the misery" (B 88). Through Jeremy, McEwan reveals the guilt of the survivor, but also those emotions that would compel us to ignore the past, and strive to forget it. Any move away from the precipice requires some reconnection with humanity. The irony is that the absence of the victims, through their deaths, makes it likely that we shall end up seeing ourselves in the perpetrators, if for no other reason that we have also survived: "We were on the other side, we walked freely like the commandant once did, or his political master, poking into this or that, knowing the way out, in the full certainty of our next meal" (B 88). Jeremy perceives that he has an easier time connecting with the living than all the dead who cry for understanding, retribution, and adequate mourning. Identification with the victims is our immediate response, the text contends, but it needs to be attenuated by some connection with the perpetrators

as well as those who stood by and allowed such things to happen. Because, if we are as honest as possible with ourselves, we will acknowledge that we could just as easily have been perpetrator as victim. Jeremy briefly contemplates with "inverted admiration" and "bleak wonder" the efficacy of the camp (B 89). Again, this may strike us as approbation rather than condemnation, but this is the novel's way of pointing out both the weaknesses inherent in human nature and the personal insight required for a complete historiography.

Delrez critiques the individualist ethos of these characters who turn inward, often to love rather than political action. He points to the behavior of the characters at this moment as revealing McEwan's inadequate postmodern response to the loss of meaning symbolized by the Holocaust. Emerging from the camp, Jeremy and Jenny find refuge in a nearby hotel. Over the next three days, their relationship begins in amorous fashion. Delrez sees their reaction to the horrors they have just witnessed as typical of McEwan's characters:

The symbolic configuration of space here suggests a separation between the public and the private (or between history and a forgetful present) as well as a shift of focus towards the latter – a shift that devalues the notion of a political project and promotes a view of ethics as entirely bound up with the ideal of self-fulfillment in love. (19)

That Jeremy and Jenny should resort to three days of uninterrupted lovemaking, however, does not strike me as so odd a reaction to Majdanek. It is simply an

extreme example of an unavoidable truth, that we all continue (do we have a choice?) to live normal lives in a world in which the most abominable crimes have been perpetrated. Is it not unavoidable that some people will feel more fully alive after emerging from the historical pit of despair? To criticize the couple's response to the Holocaust as mere escapism is facile. McEwan forcefully illuminates the general response to the horrors, that they have nothing to do with us personally. This conclusion liberates people, allows them to continue to live without confronting the reality that could very well have been their own. It becomes the objective of Jeremy within McEwan's text to underline our propensity to forget that past and our failure to recognize our own potential complicity in future acts of evil.

A good deal of the horror for McEwan lies precisely in the way postwar life inevitably stumbles on despite the occurrence of the Holocaust. Often in his fiction the world "infuriatingly, incomprehensibly . . . continues to plod its dreary course" after the pivotal moment (Slay 86). This, for McEwan and his characters, makes their experience doubly painful. After all, should the world not come to a complete standstill in the face of such extremity. In *The Comfort of Strangers*, Mary is struck by the "ordinariness" of the events that continue despite the gash that has been made in the fabric of her life. In *The Innocent*, Leonard Marnham, carrying the dismembered body of his lover's ex-husband in suitcases, is stunned that life continues in Berlin as though nothing has happened. And the young boy in the restaurant after being assaulted by his father looks around to

see that nothing has changed: "he began to cry; with the coming and going of the waitress came confirmation that after his humiliation, life was to proceed as normal. His sense of isolation was complete and he could not hold back his despair" (B 106). One can imagine survivors of the Holocaust undergoing, on a greater scale, the same kind of alienating experience, returning to a world that proceeds as before, and in fact prefers not to think about the Holocaust at all.

Although the characters, for the most part, exhibit ineffectual responses to the past - June is too isolated, Bernard too inflexible - Jeremy's text demonstrates the degree to which these responses can be encapsulated in a productive fashion. For while the text may not offer a prognosis for a direct solution, it does advocate full consideration of our individual humanity and morality as the first step in circumventing the dangers posed by the existence of the black dogs in all of us.¹⁶

Historical Coherence and the End of *Black Dogs*

Until the novel reaches Part IV, *Black Dogs* appears as a fairly typical postmodern reading of history. Its ambivalent and disillusioned narrator repeatedly asserts the impossibility of adopting a position from which to see things clearly. This position is exacerbated further by the contesting narratives of his surrogate parents, neither of which provides any satisfactory answers. The first three parts of the novel emphasize the problems inherent in any positivist or progressivist reading of history. Both Bernard and June have motivations that strongly determine their readings of the past. We also become aware that

Jeremy's narratives are partial and biased recollections. The problem in presenting an accurate description of the past is further compounded by faulty and incomplete memories, as well as alternative versions of the same events. Jeremy's blindness to his own subjectivity, combined with the self-interest he exhibits in his particular emplotment of the stories, heightens the reader's suspicions about the viability and veracity of the text. The novel also constantly reminds us of its textualization of the past. The frequent shifts in setting and time, as well as the text's consciously non-linear and episodic construction, announce the presence of an author with specific goals in mind. Through the constant deferral of the telling of the pivotal event that serves as the impetus for the text, the building of suspense also prevents any reading of the novel as unfiltered and straightforward retelling of the past.

After the achronological, disjointed, and episodic nature of the first hundred pages of the novel, however, the reader is likely to be struck by the traditional presentation of narrative in Part IV. The contrasting coherence of this section in the novel raises some questions, because it appears to assert what the text has put in doubt from the beginning. As the last thing the reader's eyes will gaze upon, this section exercises what John Fowles has called "the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the 'real' version" (318). The very order in which the information is presented implies a hierarchy of significance. But if McEwan has gone to such lengths to indicate the ways in which history is contingent, why then does he offer a seemingly transparent and authoritative version of events

narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator? David Malcolm proposes a number of ways to interpret this paradoxical approach. First, Malcolm quickly dismisses this possibility that McEwan is simply incompetent. Second, McEwan is simply presenting one more narrative among others. Third, Malcolm posits that perhaps McEwan still has some faith in the power of traditional narrative:

Certain traditional, unproblematized ways of telling (a verisimilar narrational technique, referential rather than self-referential language, lack of radical genre shifts) have a power and authority that are not wholly to be despised. The story *can* be told with some probable accuracy and authority. (149)

The construction of a coherent narrative in Part IV of the novel suggests McEwan still believes that, in the end, we must commit ourselves to one version of the truth. One other possibility is that McEwan now feels confident that readers, having been alerted to the limitations of historical reconstruction, will read the narrative of Part IV with an educated and skeptical eye.

But what Part IV truly illuminates is that there still exists an almost-universal compulsion to make sense of the past. No matter the extent to which our version of things may be disconfirmed, we still endeavor to create a narrative that appeases our particular curiosities. In this light, we can conceive of narrative as an exercise in compromise, a struggle to get reality to concede as much as it will to the desiring self. McEwan's narrator recognizes the incontestable fact that reality will almost always fall short of his desires. He may be able to manipulate

history, but he cannot transform it. Having proclaimed the insurmountable challenge that faces the analytical historian, Jeremy nevertheless undertakes to tell the story of the black dogs.

Thus Malcolm argues that Part IV reveals McEwan's own conviction that "June and Bernard's story *can* be told" (148), and John Harrison suggests that the novel's conclusion might exist independent of the rest because it is a self-contained unit, a coherent and definitive narrative. The end "relieves our anxiety by shaping and ordering. What we learnt piecemeal we now appreciate as a whole, McEwan first shows us what *can* be known, only then what we *want* to know: what it all means" (Harrison). Harrison touches here on our compulsion to create coherence despite our recognition of the chaotic nature of the past. One could also extend this observation to include the narrator, the author *and* the reader whose anxieties are also momentarily assuaged by the construction of such a narrative.

If we look more closely at Part IV, however, we can see that it does not present the past as unproblematically as these critics suggest. First, Jeremy signals his presence in the opening and closing pages of the section, simultaneously underlining the continued subjectivity of the text and undermining its apparent transparency. His hand remains evident in the construction of the narrative. Second, the controversy surrounding the Maire's story points to the logistical problems in any historical reconstruction. We will never really know what the Gestapo trained those dogs to do, and any attempt to

answer that question remains conjecture, not fact. Finally, Bernard's recollection of the couple observing a mason inscribing the names of dead villagers on a monument also underlines the fallibility of memory in recalling the past. The moment is a pivotal one for Bernard, as it will dictate and influence his future political endeavors. However, the vision of a shattered Europe, covered in the spores of the millions of dead, appears to have been elicited by an incident that never really occurred:

June knew Bernard's description of this moment, but claimed to have no memory of the woman in black that was actually her own. When I walked through La Vacquerie in 1989 on my way to the dolmen, I found that the base of the monument was inscribed with Latin quotations. There were no names of the war dead. (B 140-41)

The ideas expressed by Bernard, discussed earlier in the chapter, are central to an understanding of the novel, touching as they do on the concept of post-Holocaust anxiety. It would therefore seem counterproductive for McEwan to subvert this particular moment of historical reconstruction. The point, however, is that what actually happened in the past is ultimately not as significant as its potential effect on the present. The question as to whether the monument exists or not is of secondary importance to the actions and ideas it elicits from Bernard. In the end, McEwan suggests it is how one uses and incorporates one's memories that matters and how the narrated events impact upon the present and the future.

Much the same conclusion can be reached about June's tale of the black dogs. Whether they were truly "spirit hounds" or "incarnations" is not nearly as relevant as their symbolic force and their power to illuminate categorically the true dangers that threaten the post-Holocaust world. Early in his memoir, Jeremy observes of June's narrative, "It was a story whose historical accuracy was of less significance than the function it served. It was a myth, all the more powerful for being upheld as documentary" (B 27). This last statement perfectly encompasses McEwan's philosophy - we may never truly know the past, but some semblance of truth can emerge from the stories we tell about the past. Like Byatt, Rushdie and a number of other contemporary writers, McEwan exhibits an ambivalent relationship with the past. He knows that it cannot be known, but this does not prevent him from trying to know it. And the truths that are unearthed, whether or not they are the *real* truths of the past, are not any less true for that. We do finish the novel with a sense that McEwan feels it is imperative that we commit to something. The final paragraph of the novel, a repetition of June's half-sleeping vision, makes clear that Jeremy finally abides by her version of events. Jeremy's acknowledgement that "it is the black dogs I return to most often" gives credence to their power as symbolic structure (B 148). They are the controlling narrative motif that binds Jeremy's text into a warning of their inevitable return:

They are running down the path into the gorge of the Vis, the bigger one trailing blood on the white stones. They are crossing the

shadow line and going deeper, where the sun never reaches, and the amiable drunken mayor will not be sending his men in pursuit, for the dogs are crossing the river in the dead of night and forcing a way up the other side to cross the Causse; and as sleep rolls in they are receding from her, black stains in the gray of the dawn, fading as they move into the foothills of the mountains from where they will return to haunt us, somewhere in Europe, in another time. (B 148-49)

In an ending strongly reminiscent of Camus's *The Plague*, the message of June's dream is reiterated with conviction. In fact, this conclusion requires that we read Jeremy's memoir as a lengthy elaboration and confirmation of June's vision. The events described throughout the text finally serve to validate June's premonitions. As Jeremy's narrative makes readily apparent, whether or not June's dogs are the evil incarnations she paints them out to be, there exists any number of other maleficent entities in this post-Holocaust world, so that the best thing we can do is wisely take heed of her warning.

With some notable differences, then, the ending of McEwan's novel bears some similarity to *Possession*. Having anguished over the contingent status of his narrative, Jeremy nevertheless opts for a conventional retelling of the event that lies at the heart of the novel. What is in question, however, is not so much what happened (as it is in Byatt's novel) but what the event means. Jeremy juggles with the event's possible meanings, as propounded by Bernard and June, and

through an honest analysis of his own experiences comes to side with June's interpretation. Like Byatt, McEwan advocates an informed, perhaps even wary, commitment to one version of the truth.

Whereas Byatt is concerned with literary history and the history of ideas, however, McEwan and Rushdie tend to grapple with questions of cultural identity. McEwan is alarmed by what the recent past tells him about the European culture with which he so readily identifies, while Rushdie is troubled by historical developments in his own cherished and newly-independent India. A number of similarities will emerge between *Black Dogs* and *Midnight's Children*. Like Jeremy, Rushdie's narrator Saleem also becomes the container of all text's voices and all its history. Each narrator determines his own identity within the confines of his text, acting as storyteller, author, participant, and even reader of his own subjective version of history. Each text emphasizes how one uses memory, more so than the veracity of the memory itself. Finally, both novels illuminate the ways in which fictional representations of the past provide alternate means for thinking about the past, means not necessarily available to the documentary historian. The result is a text that causes us to contemplate anew our place in the present.

Endnotes

- ¹ Lawrence Langer takes this a step further when he states "it could be argued about the violence in Bosnia that the contending forces not only have *not* ignored the past of the Holocaust, but have paid careful attention *to* it in order to learn more about how to dehumanize their enemy in the name of some purifying ideology" (179).
- ² Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1992): 140. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, cited as B.
- ³ See Niethammer's introduction.
- ⁴ Vice cites Simon Louvish who questions the acceptability of non-survivors writing about the Holocaust: "the stuff has been taken out of the hands of those whining victims and is now the stuff of 'mainstream' art. Jewish writers can be more effectively sidelined, their accusatory polemics quietly brushed aside, their subjects coopted and sanitized, pain diffused, rage dissipated" (13).
- ⁵ Jago Morrison observes that in *Black Dogs*, "all of Nazism's legacy as a 'warning from history' is seen as subject to mutation, dissolution, and appropriation" (266).
- ⁶ McEwan illuminates both the desire to maintain one's purity and the impossibility of doing so. The most obvious example is Charles Darke in *The Child in Time*, who reverts to childhood but eventually commits suicide when reality will not bend to his vision. Leonard Marnham in *The Innocent* also strives to maintain his innocence in the face of mounting evidence. In the light of the murder and dismemberment he and his lover commit, the title of the novel can only be read ironically.
- ⁷ Bette Pesetsky observes, "What holds the reader in this book is the richly designed weaving of a truly sinister and very real postwar Europe into these lives." See also Slay (*Ian McEwan* 142).

8 See Taylor and Morrow.

9 Jago Morrison argues that the competing narratives are finally anchored by "the presence of a balancing imperative, represented by the quiet and dominating presence of the Holocaust and the reality of neo-Nazi resurgence in Europe. Within the duplex and discordant framework of the novel, therefore, both the problem of historical memory and its absolute necessity are forced into our consideration" (264).

10 McEwan acknowledges that Bernard's position was not adequately represented, and he wishes he had given a more balanced presentation: "In *Black Dogs*, my heart was really with the character, Bernard, the rationalist. But I gave the best lines to June, the mystic. At some point, I'd like to redress the balance. I'd like to write a novel in praise of rationalism - rationalism as I understand it, mediated by emotional wisdom" (Louvel 7). McEwan makes up for this imbalance in *Enduring Love* when Joe, the rationalist husband, turns out to be right all along.

11 See Mars-Jones and Taylor.

12 As Kiernan Ryan points out, "Jeremy's biography reads like a list of McEwan's fixations" (64). The existence of the prefatory text effectively blurs the line between author and narrator. The text we are holding is in fact written by Jeremy, and *not* by Ian McEwan. This is accentuated later when Jeremy makes allusion to the fact that his memoir has a title, presumably the same as the one that appears on McEwan's novel.

13 See Morrison (266).

14 See LaCapra (*History and Memory* 20-21).

15 In his thorough examination of the brutal acts carried out by the Reserve Police Battalion 101, Christopher Browning confronts the same dilemma. He quotes Bruno Bettelheim who states: "I restricted myself to trying to understand the psychology of the prisoners and I shied away from trying to understand the

psychology of the SS - because of the ever-present danger that understanding fully may come close to forgiving . . . I believe there are acts so vile that our task is to reject and prevent them, not to try to understand them empathetically" (35-6). Browning's defense bears a great deal of similarity to LaCapra's rethinking of the historical grid: "The men who carried out these massacres, like those who refused or evaded, were human beings. I must recognize that in such a situation I could have been either a killer or an evader - both were human - if I want to understand and explain the behavior of both as best I can. This recognition does indeed mean an attempt to empathize. What I do not accept, however, are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, that to understand is to forgive. Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving. The notion that one must simply reject the acts of the perpetrators and not try to understand them would make impossible not only my history but any perpetrator history that sought to go beyond one-dimensional caricature" (36).

¹⁶ McEwan gives some insight into his philosophy when he notes, "It is not the first duty of the novelist to provide blueprints for insurrection, or uplifting tales of successful resistance for the benefit of the opposition. The naming of what is there is what is important" (*A Move* xv).

CHAPTER 4

THE PALIMPSEST OF HISTORY: SALMAN RUSHDIE'S

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

The Anxiety of Fundamentalism: A World of Untruths

Like McEwan's text, Rushdie's novel is politically motivated. It strives to establish a moral framework whereby the relative merits of diversity are expounded in opposition to those of fundamentalism. Rushdie also struggles to maintain feelings of hope in an atmosphere of decline, when pessimism seems the likeliest option. Both writers offer their texts as alternate readings of the past, and hence of the present, manipulating and possessing the past in order to counteract those particular feelings of existential dread evoked by serious contemplation of the recent past.

In contrast to McEwan, who approaches his subject as an outsider, Rushdie's position is more ambivalent. Having lived in Britain since his late teens, Rushdie cannot be said to be an insider when it comes to the affairs of India. But he is not an outsider either. This cultural-positioning leads him to advocate for a "third principle," one that does not choose between binaries and refuses to engage in

any type of synthesis. As the two sides of Rushdie exist more or less peaceably within him, he advocates a similar dynamics for the Indian nation.

Saleem's narrative is driven by a similar impulse to that of McEwan's narrator, only his ambitions are on a grander scale. He, too, seeks an imaginative consensus; something that will enable communal agreement and harmony. Saleem proposes the idea of the nation as a "collective fiction," something imagined and malleable enough to accommodate millions of versions of history and definitions of self, what he calls "a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees." Here the fictional and imaginative aspects of this idea are heightened, for the existence of a fictional counternarrative ultimately offers the hope of an alternate path in avoiding a terrible future.

An era of ever-growing immigration and globalization also produces increased hybridization. Some see these changes as an accretion of impurity, with nations slowly losing their essence. Such fears have led to a renewed fundamentalist streak throughout the world, where diversity is maligned and difference is erased, often at horrific human cost. In an effort to counteract this momentum, Rushdie privileges hybridity and multiplicity. At the same time he recognizes that those who covet singularity and a supposed purity are often imbued with a singleness of purpose that those who propose diversity can never hope to possess.¹ Text highlights anxieties about the progressive, and seemingly irreversible, extinction of Nehru's dream of a democratic, secular, and harmoniously diverse India. In its stead rises Indira Gandhi's near-monarchical

rule and the privileging of the nation's Hindu majority. And historical discourse is used to corroborate the dominant's versions of nation and subject. As such, a feeling of inevitability or irreversibility often contribute to an overwhelming sense of pessimism among those who are not part of that segment of the population. Rushdie's novel, in form if not content, strives to counteract these feelings of pessimism, to counterpose Indian diversity, history, and mythology as an antidote to what he perceives as a growing fixity, intolerance, and singularity.

Midnight's Children recasts recent history by layering an alternate fictional version onto the accepted factual one. Saleem's tale, despite its solipsism and narcissistic tendencies, is proffered as a rethinking of Indian history since it gained its independence from Britain in 1947. As he weaves his narrative, Saleem strives constantly to convince his narratees (Padma inside the text, and an imagined reader outside of it) of the possibility and truth of his constructions. An interesting aspect of the text, for example, is Saleem's occasional interjection of a "maybe yes, why not" as he relates various episodes in his tale, indicating the potentially fictional and arbitrary aspects of his narrative.² Such qualification causes the listener to question whether an event occurred as described or otherwise. Saleem's equivocation, however, does not prevent the inclusion of an episode that strengthens his own particular version of events. The function of these metafictional asides, as Saleem well knows, simultaneously questions the veracity of any historical reconstruction, thereby investing Saleem's own narrative with as much probability as that of the dominant discourse. All Saleem

wants is for his listeners to consider and not discount the conceivability of the story he tells, for in doing so he makes us question those narratives we have simply come to accept unconditionally as official and historical truth.

In his study of contemporary fiction, *Children of Silence*, Michael Wood inevitably comes to consider literature's relationship to politics and history. In the case of the former, he suggests that while literature may not transcend politics, it certainly manages to escape it. The relationship with history, however, is much more problematic. Wood wonders whether literature conceptualizes an escape from, or a resistance to, history. He speculates on what an escape to an unhistorical place would look like and questions literature's powers of resistance: "But I don't think resistance is quite the word for literature's relation to history. Literature is too close to (the writing of) history to resist it, and quite often it just *is* history, taking a figurative form" (13). Instead, Wood suggests that literature "entertains history, the way we entertain an idea; it also entertains itself, never at a loss for conversation or amusement; and in its more radical form it invites history to think again" (13). I take Wood's use of the word "entertain" to mean to consider and play with different possibilities, so that rather than offering one reading of the world the literary text puts forth a plurality of choices that differ from, or at least moderately transform, the dominant realities we have a tendency to accept without question. Literature does not forego its abilities to resist or subvert, but it does so through a layering

of complementary and contradictory discourses, urging the reader to "entertain" other readings, other ways of seeing.

In his essay "Outside the Whale," for example, Rushdie insists that literature's role is to keep the avenues of dialogue open to prevent the closing-off of discursive possibilities: "It seems to me imperative that literature enter such arguments, because what is being disputed is nothing less than *what is the case*, what is truth and what untruth. If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history's great and most abject abdications."³ Rushdie's "making pictures of the world" is a form of "entertainment," in that it suggests alternative versions of what is being propounded as truth by those with the power to do so.⁴ Fiction thus opens up a realm of possibilities, avenues that may not be conceivable in the particular paradigm propounded by the dominant segment of society. David Price frames the conflict in the novel as one between an artistic representation of the past and a political one: "In the context of a history of India, Rushdie perceives an inevitable antagonism between artists (who seek to explore the myriad dimensions of past experience) and politicians (who seek to preserve the historical truth)" (130). It is understandable that the politician would be more invested in stability than the artist. A preservation of the status quo is often the first objective of the politician. Such maintenance naturally requires that alternative possibilities be discounted, if not obliterated altogether, for they

undermine the tenuous stability that allows the politician to govern and impose a will upon the past.

In the case of India, the nationalist and communalist narratives that arose in the wake of the colonizer's departure have sought to paint a picture of one India. Rushdie perceives the singular approach of the politicians as both fundamentally untrue and repressive - untrue in that it does not accurately speak for the multitudes, repressive in its attempt to eradicate those differences that undermine its wholeness. In an interview with Rani Dharker, Rushdie identifies a contemporary crisis:

[W]hat seems to be happening is a process, perhaps inevitable, by which the truth or reality itself is more and more being taken control of by certain groupings in society and out of the hands of ordinary people. And falsification of the truth has now arrived at such a scale that it's almost impossible to know what the truth might have been . . . It seems to me nowadays that it is very important for writers who can make alternate histories, who can put other pictures of the world to the ones the world would have you believe, to do that and to become adversaries of that process.

(59)

Rushdie thus places the committed artist in a contestatory role. Again, the image of writers making "pictures of the world" arises, suggesting that the world we see is not the only possible one. Rushdie demands that the writer engage in critical

history, a juxtaposition of the dominant discourses (political, historical, social) with those voices that have been silenced or repressed, in the process giving rise to a number of alternative readings of the past. Rushdie seeks to offer possibilities as to what "the truth might have been."

The writer's task is thus to remain skeptical, to resist and to question any story that is propounded by the dominant. *Midnight's Children* presents the media, particularly newspapers and radio, as tools of the government that are used primarily to propound the party line. In comparison, Saleem sees himself as "only the humblest of jugglers-with-facts" and realizes "that, in a country where the truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case" (M 326). Later, Saleem observes that "the story I am going to tell, which is substantially that told by my cousin Zafar, is as likely to be true as anything; as anything, that is to say, except what we were officially told" (335). The imaginative reconstruction is directly counterposed with the "official story," with the implication that the former is necessarily the truer of the two discourses.

Contested here is the ability to create credible narratives and the use of the imagination as a political tool for stipulating other means of conceptualizing the nation. A number of "official stories" make Saleem nervous, and perhaps the most significant of these is the narrative of national purity. As an emergent nation, Indians feel compelled to seek that which makes them essentially Indian. In order to counteract the identity that has been imposed by the colonizer, the

post-colonial turns to an originary past to uncover an unsullied essence, one that existed before the invasion. Rushdie as a post-colonial, however, feels the imposition of such notions of purity to be just as repressive and threatening as anything inflicted upon the Indian people by the British.

In this vein, Zygmunt Bauman sees the advocacy or pursuit of purity as little more than an exclusionary act. Threatened by a progressively globalized and hybridized culture, advocates of purity argue for stricter measures and harsher contingency plans. Bauman correlates the pursuit of purity as an offshoot of the establishment of order. This pursuit lead to the monstrous, but perfectly ordered, elimination systems used by both fascists and communists during the mid-century. While acknowledging that such strivings for purity still occur in the world, Bauman suggests that "we note in many places a growing indifference of the state to its past task of promoting a singular as well as a comprehensive model of order" (*Postmodernity* 13). One can posit, however, that such is not the case for a number of post-colonial countries, including India, for which recapturing essentiality is the foremost concern in the wake of centuries of colonization. For the nation concerned with affirming its unique identity on the international stage "promoting a singular as well as a comprehensive model of order" remains, in fact, a top priority.

But this idea of order, particularly in a country as heterogeneous as India, exists primarily on an abstract level. *Midnight's Children* emphasizes the imaginative component of nation-(re)building, for just as India was not the

country the British believed it to be, nor can it of necessity satisfy any single vision in terms of its neo-colonial status. The idea of India, as intangible and fragile as it is, can only be maintained through a kind of imaginative consensus. Yet it is clear that the whole can never hope to contain all of its parts; for Rushdie, the idea of India lives in its very multiplicity. If India is truly to be one nation, then it must configure a system that allows each of its seven hundred million individuals (at the time of the novel's publication) to feel truly Indian despite whatever differences distinguishes the individual from a large segment of the populace. Historical events require that India rethink itself, for though it has never stopped existing this is a new age that demands redefinition. As Saleem counts the hours down to independence, he reveals the paradox at the heart of the event:

fourteen hours to go, thirteen, twelve - there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mystical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will - except in a dream we all agreed to dream. (M 112)

How can a country that never existed have five thousand years of history? The answer, of course, is that the country existed all along, it was simply "imagined" differently. But even at this moment, Saleem posits his dream of a harmonious but diverse India: "it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth - a collective fiction in which anything was possible" (M 112). While Saleem is clearly trying to convey the feelings of optimism that accompanied the gaining of independence, his pointing to "a mass fantasy shared to varying degrees" underlines emphatically the gargantuan challenges ahead for anyone who would attempt to formulate India as *one* thing.

The phrase "varying degrees" does not begin to outline the extreme diversity of identities existing within India's boundaries. Saleem does, of course, foreshadow some of the communalist bloodshed when he admits the necessity for "rituals of blood," but his optimism allows him, at this point at least, to conceive of them as necessary evils, as national growing pains. The collective dream of a multicultural whole is immediately assailed, of course, by the reality of Partition and the creation (the imagining?) of Pakistan. Explosions of communalist violence along the India-Pakistan border, as well as the mass exodus of refugees in both directions - over ten million people, from both religions - merely serve to accentuate the fragility of Nehru's "mass fantasy."⁵

When Bauman suggests that attitudes towards essentiality, purity, and singularity have changed, he chiefly addresses the Western response to the atrocities committed by totalitarian regimes in the mid-century. He argues that an "ever growing number of postmodern men and women, while by no means immune to the fear of being lost and ever carried away by the recurring waves of 'homesickness', find the open-endedness of their situation attractive enough to outweigh the anguish of uncertainty" (*Postmodernity* 13). Such a statement would apply directly to Salman Rushdie. In his "outsider/insider" position, he seeks paradoxically for the one India that will successfully contain all the multitudes that make up the country. He prefers the indeterminacy and uncertainty occasioned by the hybridity and plurality of the country to the bland homogenizing and largely Hindu vision of an Indira Gandhi, or a Bal Thackeray of the Shiv Sena, for that matter.

Like Bauman, however, Rushdie can be perceived as approaching the idea of India, the question of India, from a largely Westernized viewpoint. The India he imagines, while democratic, secular and plural, may not be one that accords with the reality of India. For though we can speak of boundaries and walls as arbitrary constructs, they are nonetheless very real for those who must live within them. The "anguish of uncertainty" that Rushdie is willing to live with may not be a luxury that those existing within the boundaries of India can easily afford. Devoted as he is to the alluring concepts of diversity and the multifariousness of life, Rushdie condemns any attempt at essentiality. That

Rushdie is a hybrid himself makes him unmindful of the relief an individual may derive from a fixed identity. To be able to say "I am this" or "I am that," no matter how faulty or deluded that notion might be, holds a good deal of appeal for a great many people. To live in uncertainty, on the other hand, to never be one thing but always many, is a fact that would make life unbearable for many others. In a post-colonial nation that is four-fifths Hindu, and one-fifth Muslim (though they number over 130 million), it is no surprise that a struggle for identity and fixity would lie at the heart of any definition of what it means to be Indian.

Nevertheless, in response to what he perceives as growing fundamentalism and reductionism, a penchant for fixity and purity, Rushdie's fiction celebrates the mongrel and the mongrelization of societies. Saleem Sinai, Saladin Chamcha and Moraes Zogoiby are all versions of the mongrel.⁶ Saleem, raised in an upper-class Muslim family, but the child of an adulterous liaison between the Hindu wife of a street singer and a British colonial, would appear to be the antithesis of what it means to be truly Indian. But this is precisely Rushdie's point; Saleem's mongrelness makes him the perfect representative of the India that Salman Rushdie and Jawaharlal Nehru cherish. So when Nehru writes to Saleem and tells him that his life "will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own," he has no idea just how right he will be (*M* 122). As Patrick McGee observes, "Though his identity is historically bound to postindependence India, it is genealogically indeterminate. He is the symbolic child of England, India, and

Pakistan, of Hindu and Moslem, of imperialism and nationalism, of European and Indian literature" (141). Of course, Saleem's hybridity, which Rushdie presents as a mirror of India's own multiplicity, is an impure state. His very mongrelness is an affront to those groups that advocate an Indian essentiality.

Rushdie's Palimpsest History

Saleem's hybridizing and inclusive position, one privileged throughout *Midnight's Children*, is also shared by the author. But one of the anxieties that assails Rushdie is the realization that if a nation can be "imagined" into existence, it can just as easily be "imagined" out of it. The idea of the palimpsest contravenes this fear since it does not so much replace one narrative with another as transform the original narrative by painting over, or skewing certain facts. I define "palimpsest" as a structure that builds upon a preexisting one, creating something new that includes vestiges of the past. Two narratives thus coexist in the place of the one. Though filled with binary opposites, Rushdie's texts communicate an investment in their coexistence rather than the eradication of one by the other. The palimpsest's function, apart from reviving alternate narratives that have been painted over by the dominant discourse, is to demonstrate that both dominant and alternate narratives coexist in actuality. The idea of the palimpsest appeals to Rushdie because it allows him to proffer his notion of the many versions over the one. India is itself a palimpsest with a number of "histories" layered one on top of the other. Rushdie thus presents us

with a highly hybridized narrator, but also a highly hybridized history.

Christine Brooke-Rose suggests that Rushdie's texts should be labeled as "palimpsest history" because he invents worlds in order to mesh them with the ones that already exist (127). She argues that the novel as a genre, "took its roots in historical documents" and therefore "has always had an intimate link with history" (137). Nevertheless, each discourse encompasses a different set of motivations. Brooke-Rose proposes that "the novel's task, unlike that of history, is to stretch our intellectual, spiritual, and imaginative horizons to breaking-point" (137). The novelist tries to get us to reimagine the "facts," to think about them in terms other than those proposed by the historian or the politician. The writer of the palimpsest is not so much concerned with offering an alternate version of historical reality as he is in demonstrating the complexity and multifarious quality of the past. Rushdie struggles against the singularizing impulses of history that would pronounce one past and one India.

The creation of a palimpsest is paradoxically dependent upon the existence of an originary text. Thus, though he has been criticized for it, Rushdie demonstrates both a respect for, and a reluctance to tamper with, the historical record.⁷ After all, if one is going to impose one narrative over another, there must exist a foundation on which the palimpsest rests. An overlap must exist so that the reader can recognize what is being rewritten, what is being altered.⁸ Rushdie wishes to preserve the past with its multiple narratives, thereby heightening his argument for hybridity and variety. In the post-colonial

situation, none of the previous texts can be entirely erased – their traces always remain – and this leads to an entanglement of discordant and sometimes contradictory texts. As Rushdie well knows, however, there are dangers inherent in presuming the purity of the original text, since it was no doubt a palimpsest itself. In the process, however, Rushdie's palimpsest history undermines the authority of any fixed reading of the past. In other words, he is also concerned with post-colonial erasure in response to colonialism, the asserting of a fixed national identity that both excludes a significant portion of the population and eradicates what he holds most dear about India – its tolerance, variety, and multiplicity.

Thus, Rushdie's re-imagining of India is contingent upon a re-reading of both colonial and nationalist texts. As the bearer of cultural memory, Saleem adopts the role of an artist-historian who recalls the lives washed over by the tides of History. *Midnight's Children* does not present itself as a palimpsest of the nation, but rather as a palimpsest of other texts *about* the nation. This is most evident when Saleem adopts the voice and tone of a disinterested historian, usually at moments when he feels obligated to provide background dates and numbers.⁹ Contrasted with the fabulous tales he spins, these academic passages highlight the limitations of the supposedly depersonalized and objective version of the documentary historian. Thus, though the novel is concerned with the textuality of history, Rushdie also shows how such texts translate into a lived reality. All of these texts contribute ultimately to a sense of personal, communal, and national

identity. By constructing his palimpsest, Rushdie demonstrates that there are other ways of knowing the past, less conventional means of conveying individual experience and its role in the construction of national identity. The entire justification of the historical document is to offer a narrative that is as close to the truth of what happened as plausible or probable. There is no room for conjecture or wild speculation. The novelist, unencumbered by such cognitive constraints, can allow a plurality of voices to speak concurrently. Such creative freedom, while diminishing the veracity of the fictional document, allows one to think about facts and the past from a dramatically skewed perspective.

Saleem's difficulty may reside in precisely the fact that his narrative allows for too many alternatives, for though they are refracted through a single narratorial voice the contents of the narrative constantly threaten to overwhelm both the narrator and the text itself. In fact, Saleem desires nothing more than to possess the univocal qualities of the documentary historian. At the same time, he seeks a container that will preserve the variety of the contained. Saleem resembles Foucault's genealogist who rejects the essentialities of the traditional historian's document. In Foucault's words, the genealogist

always questioned the form of history that reintroduces (and always assumes) a suprahistorical perspective: a history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself; a history that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all

the displacements of the past; a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development.

The historian's history finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity.

(*Nietzsche* 86-87)

Saleem strives to create unity by "swallowing" the whole of Indian history, thus making himself *the* signifier who gives the chaos of events meaning. Such an endeavor is an impossibility, of course, as Saleem's progressive disintegration implies, yet it is nonetheless the stance most often adopted by the traditional historian in relation to the text. By adopting this stance for himself, Saleem unwittingly illuminates the limitations of any historical approach that would presume to stand outside of time.

Saleem's palimpsest does not contest the occurrence of events, but it reframes their supposed significance. By approaching history at a personal level, Saleem creates correlations between his own life and those who are often forgotten by History. For Rushdie does more than fabricate palimpsests of textbooks and encyclopedias. He also seeks to "unmake" the discourses of politicians, of dynasts, in the case of Mrs. Gandhi, and of all those who would propound an official version of the past - a pure national myth - at the expense of a large segment of the nation's populace. To this end, he questions the stories propagated by the media, particularly in moments of crisis. In a chapter entitled,

"How Saleem achieved purity," Rushdie highlights the national falsehoods generated through the newspapers:

Divorce between news and reality: newspapers quoted foreign economists - PAKISTAN A MODEL FOR EMERGING NATIONS - while peasants (unreported) cursed the so-called 'green revolution', claiming that most of the newly-drilled water-wells had been useless, poisoned, and in the wrong places anyway; while editorials praised the probity of the nation's leadership, rumours, thick as flies, mentioned Swiss bank accounts and the new American motor-cars of the President's son. (M 334)

Here Saleem openly contrasts the official voice of the government with those "unreported" and unheard, that of the peasant and the man-on-the-street. Such a juxtaposition immediately casts doubt on the official story, at least insofar as it presents an incomplete version of reality. When war does break out, the same falsehoods hold true for the radio. In an unequivocally sarcastic tone, Saleem describes the reporting: "And on the radio, what destruction, what mayhem! In the first five days of the war Voice of Pakistan announced the destruction of more aircraft than India had ever possessed; in eight days, All-India Radio massacred the Pakistan Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man" (M 339). In such an atmosphere, in which the government and its media counterparts are fabricating palimpsests of their own, it seems only natural that Saleem should espouse his own "objective" reading of events: "Let me state this

quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth" (M 338). Again, by propounding the private view rather than the public, Rushdie presents an alternate way of assessing history. Saleem does later acknowledge that his interpretation of the bombing pattern is "either a matter of fact or a figment of a diseased imagination" (M 341). This admission does not negate the veracity of his interpretation since it simply puts it in question in the same manner as the official stories have been undermined.

It is, of course, no accident that Saleem refers to the bombings as a form of purification on the part of the government. The irony is that Saleem "achieves purity" only at the moment when he forgets the past. Struck in the head by his mother's silver spittoon, projected through the air by the explosion that killed his family, Saleem is rendered temporarily amnesic. Washed clean of any historical thinking, he is unable to accept as true the ghastly scenarios played out before his eyes. Instead, he has recourse only to government propaganda, disbelieving because it tells him that things cannot be so. Later, as he seeks to escape the terrors of the Bangladesh war, Saleem and a fellow soldier, Shaheed, find themselves in Dacca. The terrors, however, cannot be so easily evaded:

Shaheed and I saw many things which were not true, which were not possible, because our boys would not could not have behaved so badly; we saw men in spectacles with heads like eggs being shot

in side-streets, we saw the intelligentsia of the city being massacred by the hundreds, but it was not true because it could not have been true, the Tiger was a decent chap, after all, and our jawans were worth ten babus. (M 375)

Saleem recognizes that certain truths cannot really be told because they are too terrible to know. Unwilling to face the harsh realities his eyes are revealing to him, he resorts to believing the stories that have been propagated about Tiger Niazi and the Pakistani troops. Once more, Saleem's purity prevents him from truly perceiving the reality of the situation.

Thus the narrative of purity, one essential to the fabrication of the nation, is irrevocably linked to a cleansed reading of the past that simply washes away whatever does not accord with the imagined national narrative. Again, Rushdie raises the issue of the truthfulness of history and the idea that the knowledge of certain facts may prove detrimental to the maintenance of national identity. He challenges both the supposed essentiality of the nation and the purity of the historical document. Neither can be as flawless, or as categorical, as some of their advocates would pretend them to be. For while there is no such thing as unmediated truth, there is something called distortion. Rushdie's palimpsest reveals the extent to which facts are manipulated, shifted or excluded altogether in historical reconstruction. Since the nation is an imaginative construct, one that depends on the collective acquiescence of its population, it is imperative the government constructs a narrative that most will believe. As this narrative or

national myth takes shape it starts to exclude whatever does not accord with the proposed vision of itself. Certain stories or variations on history cannot be incorporated because they put in question the fixity the myth strives to perpetuate.

Despite whatever "postmodern" qualities the novel may be said to possess, whatever acknowledgments it makes towards relativism and doubt, no matter how much it glories in the beauties of uncertainty, there is nevertheless a moral framework behind *Midnight's Children*. There are values to which Rushdie, for all his ambivalence, unequivocally adheres. For though the veracity of certain narratives may be placed in question, their usefulness as constructions may sometimes outweigh whatever is gained from determining just how true they actually are. The reason some narratives are "truer" than others, Neil ten Kortenaar suggests, "lies in their adequacy as explanatory strategies" (54). In other words, the narrative that most helps us to make sense of the world carries a "truthfulness" that is not merely restricted to the accuracy of its facts. As Saleem contends, "Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than facts" (M 47). Rushdie's rewriting of key events in recent Indian history is based precisely on the idea of an admixture of known and unknown, public and private, told and untold. The constant references to a hidden or ignored past maintain a feeling that historical events may not be as irreversible as they appear on the surface. Thus, an event such as the Emergency of 1975, which appears to squash all democratic and secular hope, can be redrawn to highlight those

elements of Indian society whose voices have been silenced by dynastic powers. Part of the rewriting of history requires a damning of the dynasty and a refocusing on the inherent potential of the diverse population of India.

Reshaping History and Indira Gandhi's Emergency

Rushdie has commented on the fact that Indira Gandhi's declaration of martial law in 1975, the Emergency as it is commonly known, was a principal impetus for the writing of the novel. In fact, he conceives of the Emergency as an "outrageous crime" that has left a "stain" upon *Midnight's Children* (Haffenden 240). In the same way that the birth of the midnight's children symbolized the unlimited potential and idealism of the nation, so Mrs. Gandhi's act indicates the withering of that dream. Throughout the novel, Saleem demonstrates how feelings of optimism engendered by independence are slowly washed away by events over the first twenty five years, culminating with this most undemocratic and unprincipled of events.

Not wishing to give in to pessimism, however, Rushdie still maintains that an independent India can fulfill its promise by simply rewriting its place in history. Rushdie refers to this period as the first age of Indian independence, one that is replaced by a second age that might more closely accommodate Nehru's dream. He tells John Haffenden that the Emergency "represented the dark side of Independence, and there was a progression from one to the other - from light to dark - and that was going to be the progression of the book and of Saleem's

personality. It never occurred to me that people would read the book as showing the end of all hope" (Haffenden 244).

Rushdie's inability to understand those readings of the novel as one full of hopelessness and despair is a topic I shall return to at the end of the chapter. Pessimism is often the product of feelings of irreversibility, of a sense that there are no available means for turning around a current trend. At the time of writing the novel, Rushdie had clearly not reached this point, although some of his later works, particularly *The Moor's Last Sigh*, seem to point to a complete loss of hope. However, in 1979 Rushdie still felt that things could change. In this regard, his approach to history bears some resemblance to McEwan's; each strives to maintain hope in a world that is becoming progressively dark. The irony is that Rushdie's optimism prevents him from acknowledging the very truths his text reveals to him. Part of Rushdie's dilemma stems from his strict adherence to the historical text and the chronology of history. So though he may invest hope in the next generation the events in India in the second half of the twentieth century simply do not corroborate feelings of optimism. Written between the time of the Emergency and Indira Gandhi's resurgence to power, Rushdie's novel is largely determined by its historical-situatedness. In a novel much concerned with dates (one might say, overly so), the author is unable to extricate his story from the general tenor of the times in which it was written.

If *Midnight's Children* is indeed to be considered a hopeful book, one of the greatest challenges facing its author is how to address the events of the

Emergency and how to cast their results in a positive light. Rushdie's desire to keep some flicker of hope alive is mirrored in some ways by the maneuverings of his protagonist. And although Rushdie insists he is good deal less passive than Saleem, the latter's inaction is restricted entirely to the physical level. The act of narrating, albeit after the fact, is fraught with redemptive potential, for keeping alive, at least on a metaphorical level, the national promise embodied in Saleem and, indeed, all of the midnight's children.

As with other historical events in his narrative, Saleem's retelling of the Emergency avers the existence of a hidden or excluded version. Speaking of Indira Gandhi, for example, he declares, "But she has white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency, too, had a white part - public, visible, documented, a matter for historians - and a black part which, being secret macabre untold, must be a matter for us" (*M* 421). Again, Saleem frames his narrative as the "untold version," the truth that has not seen the life of day. But he also acknowledges the hybridity of truth made up of both white and black parts.

At the very beginning of a chapter entitled "Midnight," Saleem openly struggles with the truths of his story and his desire to look away, to pretend certain things did not happen:

No! - But I must.

I don't want to tell it! - But I swore to tell it all. - No, I renounce,
not that, surely some things are better left . . . ? - That won't wash;

what can't be cured, must be endured! But surely not the
 whispering walls, and treason, and snip snip, and the women with
 the bruised chests - Especially those things. - But how can I, look at
 me, I'm tearing myself apart, can't even agree with myself, talking
 arguing like a wild fellow, cracking up, memory going, yes,
 memory plunging into chasms and being swallowed by the dark,
 only fragments remain, none of it makes sense any more! - But I
 mustn't presume to judge, must simply continue (having once
 begun) until the end; sense-and-nonsense is no longer (perhaps
 never was) for me to evaluate - But the horror of it, I can't won't
 mustn't won't can't no! - Stop this, begin. - No! - Yes. (M 421-22)

This passage reflects some of the contradictions existing within Saleem. Part of him wants to keep hoping, but part of him finds himself foolish for doing so. Saleem recognizes the dangers of giving into one's desires and only framing the past with which one is most comfortable. But he does not really shirk from describing the horrors, his hesitations merely reflect our innate tendency to do so. As with the descriptions of the Bangladesh war, there is a surreal quality to Saleem's narration of the Emergency. As Rustom Bharucha notes, "So fervent are his descriptions of the Emergency that the distinctions between history and fiction are not merely blurred, it is almost as if the roles have been reversed. History becomes fiction, a terrifying fairy tale" (167). Fairy tale or not, Saleem does paint a bleak portrait of a country in the throes of despotism, where

political repression, the suspension of individual rights, censorship of the press, and forced sterilizations are the normal course of events.

While halfheartedly conceding to some of the positive aspects of the Emergency, Rushdie focuses primarily on its two most controversial measures.¹⁰ The destruction of the magicians' ghetto is a direct allusion to the project of slum clearance undertaken by Sanjay Gandhi. Saleem's emphasis on the significance of conjurers and entertainers – their abilities to grasp or evoke other realities – throughout his narrative renders their destruction and dispersal at the hands of Indira Gandhi's monomania all the more tragic: "[T]he city was beautified, and if there were a few deaths, if a girl with eyes like saucers and a pout of grief upon her lips fell beneath the advancing juggernauts, well, what of it, an eyesore was being removed from the face of the ancient capital" (M 431). Saleem's momentary adoption of a bureaucratic voice highlights the significance that very voice would seek to erase. The "beautification" of the city comes at a terrible cost, paid primarily by the city's Muslim and impoverished segment of the population.

The other drastic measure implemented by Mrs. Gandhi's government is a program that leads to literally thousands of poor and vulnerable individuals being dragged off the streets and forcibly sterilized. Rushdie addresses this outrageous crime through the ultimate fate of the midnight's children. Eventually captured by Shiva, Saleem is imprisoned and tortured, whereupon he reveals the names and locations of the surviving children, sealing their

destruction. When Saleem contends that the primary reason for the Prime Minister's declaration of the Emergency was "the smashing, the pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight" (M 427), he sounds as though he were once more giving in to the paranoia that allowed him to see the killing of his family as the underlying cause of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965. Nevertheless, as in many of his declarations, there resides within a grain of truth. For the midnight's children, much like the undesirables whose reproductivity Indira Gandhi seeks to curtail, represent a hybridity that stands as a direct threat to her monolithic vision of India. This portion of Saleem's narrative reaches its climax with the sterilization of the midnight's children and the performing of sperectomies, "the draining out of hope" (M 437). The horror is accentuated by Saleem's account of how the evidence of these cruelties was disposed of: "When four-hundred-and-twenty suffered ectomies, an avenging Goddess [Mrs. Gandhi] ensured that certain ectomized parts were curried with onions and green chillies, and fed to the pie-dogs of Benares" (440). In direct contrast to the chutneys Saleem will create in order to preserve the past, Indira Gandhi's recipes seek to ensure a collective and national amnesia.

In fact, the narrative at times suggests that Mrs. Gandhi is indeed victorious. Having finished this nightmarish tale, for example, Saleem turns to Padma and his audience and admits, "No, I can't prove it, not any of it" (M 440). Just as the full extent of the horrors of the Emergency will probably never find its way into the history books, so the respective fates of the midnight's children shall simply

vanish from the official record. Rushdie's objective is to make us question our assumptions about what we think we know and how we think we know it. The truth of the past is ultimately some unidentifiable hybrid, something we may occasionally glimpse but never quite pin down. Saleem's concession cannot erase the power of the events he has just described. Some things are undoubtedly true, whether evidence to prove it happened exists or not.

Rushdie's novel presents a counter-narrative to Indira Gandhi's misreading of the narrative of nation as propounded by Nehru. Rushdie asserts that conditions have not really changed in India and will not do so until the Gandhi dynasty loosens its grip on the people. Saleem sees the Emergency as simply one more example of the constant oppression the Indian people have had to endure:

When the Constitution was altered to give the Prime Minister well-nigh-absolute powers, I smelled the ghosts of ancient empires in the air . . . in that city which was littered with the phantoms of Slave Kings and Mughals, of Aurangzeb the merciless and the last, pink conquerors, I inhaled once again the sharp aroma of despotism. (M 424)

Indira Gandhi's form of rule does not significantly differ from that imposed by the British during their colonization of the country. Yet this exercise of power also rings of desperation, and Saleem senses that it also signals the birth of a new age for India. The failure of Indira Gandhi's autocracy signals a return to the abandoned dream. Writing after her assassination in 1984, Rushdie identifies the

moment as one when India must finally move away from her monarchical style of government; "The Queen is dead; *vive la République*," the author proclaims (IH 44). India must emerge from its troubles by returning to the original idea of privileging the nation's multitudes:

For a nation of seven hundred millions to make any kind of sense, it must base itself firmly on the concept of multiplicity, of plurality and tolerance, of devolution and decentralization wherever possible. There can be no one way - religious, cultural, or linguistic - of being an Indian; let difference reign. (IH 44)

Indira Gandhi's rule, despite whatever good it may have brought the nation, is a perversion of Nehru's original and inclusive vision in its progressive privileging of Hindu over Muslim.

But Rushdie does not place all of the blame on the shoulders of the government. Saleem and the midnight's children mirror the nation, not only in their potential promise but also in their dissension and their collective inability to reach a consensus. Saleem's betrayal of his midnight counterparts reflects his generation's inability to fulfill the expectations embodied in Nehru's independence speech. Just as Saleem reveals his human weakness at the hands of his torturers, so the children "betray" the nation by demonstrating their incapacity to rise above their differences. "Who were we?" Saleem asks, "Broken promises; made to be broken" (M 439).¹¹

In a paradoxical move, however, Rushdie also casts the Emergency – that moment of "continuous midnight" – as one of rebirth. So while the Emergency may signal the end for Saleem and that first wave of naive idealism – "the draining of all hope" – Rushdie also conceptualizes it as a stage in the eventual rebirth of a new India emerging from the dying throes of Mrs. Gandhi's autocratic rule. Thus, while the moment definitely signals the end of something for Saleem's generation, it also announces the beginning of a new age for India, embodied in Aadam Sinai who, as Shiva's biological progeny but Saleem's "son," manifests those principles of hybridity to which Rushdie most strongly adheres. To this end, Rushdie's creates a series of parallels between Saleem and Aadam. Aadam is born on the stroke of midnight on the day the Emergency is declared. Neither the irony nor the significance is lost on the reader. Tied to a specific moment in the nation's chronicle, Aadam Sinai is also "mysteriously handcuffed to history, his destinies indissolubly linked to those of his country" (M 420). But whereas Saleem and the midnight's children are born during a moment of complete optimism, Aadam begins his life at a dark period in India's history:

[A]t exactly the same moment, the word Emergency was being heard for the first time, and suspension-of-civil-rights, and censorship-of-the-press, and armoured-units-on-special-alert, and arrest-of-subversive-elements, something was ending, something was being born, and at the precise instant of the birth of the new India and the beginning of a continuous midnight which would not

end for two long years, my son, the child of the renewed ticktock,
came out into the world. (M419)

The tensions in this passage are apparent. Midnight, a fortuitous moment which lends its name to the novel's title, signals a moment of change when things can begin anew. In the case of the Emergency, however, Rushdie must extend the metaphor to accommodate a prolonged period of bleakness in Indian history, the "continuous midnight" of Indira Gandhi's imposed rule. The underlying thought, however, is that hope still exists and that this is a transitional moment. Aadam, the name not too subtly suggesting a new beginning, and his generation will emerge from the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and create a new India. Much of Rushdie's optimism is tied up with this concept of rebirth. The idea of decline is circumvented by the notion that when something dies it can begin anew in a different form. Saleem suggests that the moment of birth may contribute to the degree of success: "We, the children of Independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future; he, Emergency-born, will be is already cautious, biding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist" (M 425). Thus, in the same manner that despotism can recur, so can hope and optimism. Later, Saleem recognizes that Aadam is "a member of a second generation of magical children who would grow up far tougher than the first, not looking for their fate in prophecy or the stars, but forging it in the implacable furnaces of their wills" (M 447). The new generation will not suffer from the same "optimism disease" that afflicted Saleem and his peers; born in an age of "continuous midnight," they will

not be dreamers like their predecessors for they will approach the idea of India much more pragmatically.

Saleem's Third Principle and the Nation as Construct

As a combination of Shiva and Saleem (and Parvati, of course), Aadam encompasses one of Rushdie's most cherished ideas, that of a "third principle." A number of critics have pointed out that while Rushdie's novels are filled with polarities, he wishes to rise above them, or at least learn to live with them. For it is in the space in between that newness is born, that unexpected configurations are given birth.¹² The third principle does not aim to resolve the conflict, nor does it attempt to reconcile the polarities in some Hegelian synthesis, but rather it accepts or at least tolerates their antimonies.

Early in *Midnight's Children*, for example, Saleem confesses his love for the game of Snakes and Ladders. After lauding its "perfect balance of rewards and penalties," Saleem observes that the game reveals "the eternal truth that for every ladder you climb, a snake is waiting just around the corner; and for every snake, a ladder will compensate" (M 141). The young Saleem also sees that the game embodies "the unchanging twoness of things, the duality of up against down, good against evil; the solid rationality of ladders balances the occult sinuosities of the serpent; in the opposition of staircase and cobra we can see, metaphorically, all conceivable oppositions " (M 141). Saleem concedes that binary constructions have their appeal because they allow for concrete decisions

- something is either this or that, and one is either on that side or this side of an issue. Nevertheless, the game soon disappoints him because it "lack[s] one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity - because, as events are about to show, it is possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake" (M 141). Saleem's tale refuses to accede to the fixity of these oppositions, seeking instead to keep everything in flux, thus allowing for possibilities not encompassed in the mutually exclusive categories. The disappointment Saleem experiences with the game can be extrapolated to Rushdie's perspective on the question of India. In order for the nation truly to embrace its diverse nature it must learn to accept ambiguity and ambivalence. Rushdie sees the nation as too ensconced in a paradigm of binary oppositions, dictated by its quest to define the essential qualities of "being Indian," to accept its amorphous and multitudinous condition.

The novel details Saleem's efforts to convince both others and himself that a third principle is indeed attainable. At first, the Midnight Children's Conference fills Saleem with optimism because it appears to be a microcosm of Nehru's dream. The magical appearance of this group of children at the moment of independence seems to attest to the possibility of the peaceful coexistence of complexity, ambiguity, and diversity. Soon, however, Saleem sees that the children are becoming afflicted with the same petty concerns that oppress India as a whole. He recognizes, ironically, that in this act of self-disintegration, the children indeed "fulfilled the prophecy of the Prime Minister and became, in

truth, a mirror of the nation" (M 255). Thus, many of the children begin to espouse exclusionary ideologies, having fallen prey to the prejudices of their parents. But Saleem rails at this outcome; he implores the children:

Don't let this happen! Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us!

We . . . must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma; for only by being other, by being new, can we fulfill the promise of our birth! (M 255)

Saleem still holds out hope for the Conference to overcome their differences and provide a new way to think for and about India. But Saleem himself is part of a polar opposition with Shiva, one that drives the Conference to its inevitable destruction. Shiva rejects Saleem's vision, "No, little rich boy; there is no third principle; there is only money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, and right-and-left; there is only me-against-the-world!" (M 307). Threatened by Shiva's position, Saleem opts for excluding him from their meetings. By not transmitting Shiva's thoughts to the other children, however, Saleem engages in a form of absolutism himself. This decision eventually has adverse effects on the Conference, and the children never attain the harmony they dreamed of, despite their powers and the optimism with which they embarked upon accomplishing their dream.

Saleem's "third principle," as Sabrina Hassumani points out, stresses impurity in the face of the purity espoused in Shiva's absolutist binary constructions (39).

Instead of espousing the black or the white, Saleem seeks for an unbalanced mixture of the two that forsakes any quest for the truth. Throughout the text the pursuit of purity is portrayed as blind in its inability to accept the truths of the past or the realities of the nation's diverse population, or fruitless in its destruction rather than creation of possibilities. As Hassunami notes, Rushdie's novel is about "the enabling power of hybridity" (31). If the nation is ever to emerge from under the shadow of invaders, colonizers, and dynasties, it must turn to its most important resource, its very multifariousness.

Nevertheless Saleem is trapped within his subjective viewpoint, and his rejection of Shiva's opposing sentiment is simply the most dramatic exposure of his own agenda. As an individual ensnared within his specific context, Saleem is unable to exist in the in-between space, to be the force between the horns of the dilemma. The very fact, however, that Saleem's text manages to contain such heterogeneity, no matter how imperfectly, suggests that the third principle may be an achievable objective. So while Saleem himself may not be able to attain this "principle," there is the possibility that his text might. In *The Satanic Verses*, the narrator asks, "how does newness enter the world?" The answer, for Rushdie, lies in a community that refuses any fixed identity, basks in its multiplicity, and leaves itself open to difference and variation. Unfortunately, the methods through which this "third principle" might be applied to the nation are not concretized; Rushdie's text never gets beyond the dreaming or the imagining.

There exists hope, but it always seems to get beaten down by the brute reality of the nation.

Both Rushdie and Saleem propose a paradigm-shift that will allow the nation to think of itself in different, less communal or religious terms. The idea of the nation as a product of the collective imagination, as an "imagined community" to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, is one that Rushdie revisits throughout his fiction. Speaking of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie notes:

what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions. I tried to make it as imaginatively true as I could, but imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect.

(IH 10)

The activity is suspect because it is so subjective. Rushdie acknowledges that the India he creates is one to which he wishes to belong, and one that may no longer exist, if it ever did. But the activity is honorable because it allows for the continual possibility of renewal rather than closure, of change rather than stasis, and of inclusion rather than exclusion. Instead of curtailing possibility in the search for one essential India, Rushdie's vision accentuates the conceivability of communal collaboration and the idea of a nation that glories in its heterogeneity.

Rushdie recognizes that his version of India is just one among many.

Nevertheless, the implication is that Rushdie, through Saleem, wishes the reader

at least to *entertain* the possibility that his version *might* be the true one. As strong an opponent to fixity and singularity as Rushdie would never overtly advocate for the privileging of his version; however, there is a sense that we are meant to consider this version as the best one possible. Again, there is strong emphasis placed upon imagination, as though thinking it might one day make it so. Since one of Rushdie's objectives is to demonstrate that no single version of India can ever hope to contain it, we can assume that he thinks no differently about his own attempt. Nevertheless, most of us probably read the novel as one individual's attempt to incorporate as much as he can in a single fictive vision. The question then becomes how to distinguish those histories that deserve our assent from those that do not. There is a sense that Rushdie is engaging in an act of historical layering, pasting his version of the past over others, creating a new version - a strongly hybridized history of India.

Rushdie truly wants, on some level, to reclaim the Bombay of his childhood. He wishes ultimately to recapture pluralist Bombay rather than India, that great unencompassable entity. Thus, while Bombay is a microcosm of heterogeneous India, Rushdie also recognizes that no other place in India quite resembles Bombay for the city stands on its own in the very extent of diversity it encompasses. In a conversation with Günther Grass, Rushdie spoke of having "lost a city," and of having had "very much the desire of wanting to reclaim it" (72). The question is what exactly does this act of reclamation look like? What does it mean to *reclaim* Bombay? This gesture is not dissimilar from Byatt's

evocation of Victorian England. Though nostalgia impels this activity, there is something about Bombay, about its past, that Rushdie values and wishes to preserve from extinction. Aligning himself with "writers in [his] position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates," Rushdie observes that they "will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that [they] will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (*IH* 10). By once again emphasizing the role of the imagination, Rushdie highlights the inherent potential of writing as an emancipatory act. By conceptualizing a middle ground, somewhere that is not exactly the past but not the present either, the writer conjures up possibilities that escape consideration within the binary framework. The writer of fiction, not constrained by the restrictions of reality, may fantasize about an assortment of prospects in the process allowing us to think differently about our situation. Whether these possibilities are applicable in reality is not as significant as their capacity to elicit alternative conceptions of the nation.

Rushdie, in fact, frames his very cultural positioning as a kind of "third principle." Some critics have accused Rushdie of writing about a culture to which he no longer belongs; his exile has made him an outsider, and thus excluded from any dialogue pertaining to India. Rushdie sees his cultural positioning, however, as beneficial; he maintains that living in two different lands has given him "stereoscopic vision" so that he is able to "look at two societies from both the inside and the outside" (Ross 6). His condition as a

migrant makes him particularly well-suited to address the issue, since he is not blinded by any particular conception, Indian or Western, of what precisely India should be. In fact, he also suggests that as "a writer who is out-of-country and out-of-language," he is in the best position to speak of the nation's past (IH 12).¹³

But Rushdie is "out-of-country" because the country with which he identifies (if, in fact, it is a country and not a city) no longer exists.¹⁴ Rushdie recognizes his tenuous position and that his generation may effectively be out of time, but I would argue that he does not relinquish the ideals because he believes that they are still achievable goals. In fact, believing in itself may almost be enough to make them come true. In an essay entitled "In God We Trust," Rushdie suggests that life can be manipulated simply by thinking about it in different terms: "We seek to give life to these grand visions, and we assume that *we can do so*; that our dreams are attainable, that the world can be made what we wish if we wish it enough, that we are capable of *making history*" (IH 378). In a sense, what he sets out to do is have us see, if only in our imagination, another world or another way the world might be. In the process, we are more likely to question the world we have and think about how we can change it.

This, in effect, is what Saleem sets out to do when he sits down to write his autobiography. Displeased and frightened by the metamorphosis of Nehru's pluralist dream, primarily under Indira Gandhi's rule, Saleem embarks upon the writing of a concurrent narrative to the official story of India, one that highlights the heterogeneity of the nation and gives voice to those who have been silenced

in the desperate quest to define what it means to "be Indian." Saleem is not a true representation of a pure Indian; he is a mongrel. Rushdie contends that Saleem's very mongrelized status, his impurity, makes him a true representative of the Indian people. Thus, if Saleem can accentuate his privileged position as hybrid/mongrel, he will vindicate those including Rushdie who believe the future of India lies in its diversity. If he succeeds in recreating the nation in his own image, he may be empowered to propose some alternate paths for the nation's future. By taking control of the narrative, by investing himself with narratorial agency, Saleem becomes the subject rather than the object of history.

Narcissism and Solipsism in the Reading of History

Faced with the impossible task of telling the story of seven hundred million people, Saleem opts to tell his own. Linking himself by birth, fate and identity, directly and metaphorically, to independent India allows Saleem to contain the multitudes within a single text. For though he insists he is only telling his story, he is simultaneously narrating the nation. In a comic twist, Rushdie reverses the notion of the masses containing and subsuming the individual so that "instead of Saleem being a tiny grain on the beach he would actually be the speck of dust that contained the beach or the universe" (Chaudhuri 25). Rushdie signals that the novel "is a fundamentally comic inversion because, of course, [Saleem] doesn't really contain the world, he only thinks he does" (Chaudhuri 25).

Nevertheless, this conviction allows Saleem to forge ahead and construct his narrative.

Saleem casts himself as a "swallower of lives" and maintains that in order for the reader to understand the tale, it will be necessary to "swallow the lot as well" (M 9). This act of swallowing entails both total consumption and acceptance of the tale's veracity. Not only must we ingest everything he tells us, but we must also believe it. By "swallowing," of course, Saleem implies that he is able to ingest, digest, and synthesize all the information he gathers, as well as the events he both does and does not experience directly. Again, this suggests that some kind of formal control can be exerted over the multitude of events and people that make up that entity called "India." Saleem's paradoxical project emphasizes the sheer incommensurability of its subject while maintaining that said subject can be enclosed within a single formal structure. He later repeats his assertion that to "understand just one life, you have to swallow the world. I told you that" (M 109). Then, stressing the importance of ego-survival, he also adds, "perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque" (M 109). Saleem recognizes the incongruities of his project, but the direct link between the individual and the nation is highlighted in the figure of the grotesque. The nation, according to Rushdie, is not the idealized formalized unity that essentialists wish it to be, but a shapeless, ever-changing mass that can be all things to all people. Saleem, with his

constantly changing identities and his hybridized past, becomes the perfect symbol for Rushdie's new India.

Ironically, Saleem's narcissistic reading of the past is a product of his insecurities brought on by indeterminate origins and, hence, an indeterminate identity. If he can find the means to contain the nation, and he is himself the nation, then he will have gone a long way towards soothing these anxieties. If we follow Saleem's logic, the equation is as follows: by securing a stable identity for himself, he will secure one for the nation as well. Having received Nehru's letter announcing that the nation will be watching him closely since his life is "in a sense, the mirror of our own" (M 122), Saleem feels compelled to read significance into even the smallest of events. Thus, he declares to the reader, "I was already beginning to take my place at the centre of the universe; and by the time I had finished, I would give meaning to it all" (M 126-7). Like the historian, Saleem provides a context through which meaning is conferred on otherwise random events - his own life. Seen through this solipsistic lens, however, the history of India takes on far different tones than those usually gleaned in history books. The act of swallowing implies digestion, so that what is presented is a product transformed internally into a narrative with personal meaning.

Meaning is a primary concern of Saleem's throughout his text. Having identified himself so closely with the country means that Saleem must find a correlation or analogy between every event that occurs in India and his own history. Born on the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the day that India's

independence is officially declared, Saleem observes, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (M 9). But what does this mean precisely? Are we not all prisoners of history in one degree or another? Saleem, though, perceives himself narcissistically as a vital component in the unfolding of India's history. At the same time, he recognizes that such a posture may be nothing more than pure grandiose folly and acknowledges repeatedly to the reader that "above all things, I fear absurdity" (M 9). It is of the utmost importance that he give his existence meaning, that neither he nor the newly "imagined" country be only arbitrary constructs that can be conceived one moment and forgotten (or re-imagined) the next. The struggle to avoid meaninglessness, however, depends entirely upon the construction of a context. Saleem creates this context by inextricably linking his own identity with national history.

At the same time a very real tension exists in the novel between Saleem's seeming control of the historical facts – his command of the truth – and his self-depiction as victim. He points to this apparent contradiction when he notes, "From ayah to Widow, I've been the sort of person *to whom things have been done*; but Saleem Sinai, perennial victim, persists in seeing himself as protagonist" (Rushdie's emphasis M 237). One might note in passing the interesting separation of narrator/protagonist, the speaking "I" and the acting Saleem are distinguished in the very same sentence. The truth of the matter is that he is at his most protagonistic when he is narrating, for the agency he gains from crafting

his tale allows him to circumvent his historical circumstances. Saleem's undermining of various narratives with his own versions underlines his role as creator rather than recorder of his own history. So while he recognizes the provisional status of his narrative, he also exults in its emancipatory functions and its potential for keeping hope alive.

In an interview with Rani Dharker, Rushdie points to the confusion raised by Saleem's conflicting passivity and authority:

I had a problem in the book of making him act. He would consistently resist action. And the older he got the more he resisted it There are certain things he resists doing. And Saleem refuses to become really active. He does occasionally act. He becomes more and more passive as the book goes on and I got more and more irritated with him. And I couldn't do much about it because that's how he is. I think his, whatever you want to call it, defeat at the end of the book seems to me like a fairly strong criticism of him. But because the book is narrated his voice is the authority in the book. And it's very difficult for the reader to see through that authority to another point of view about him. (48)

Rushdie acknowledges the inherent power of Saleem's narrative; since his is the lone voice we hear, we are likely to accept much of what he tells us. The fact that his weaknesses are so readily visible also means that we are not likely to accept his version of events unconditionally.

As Rushdie points out, the irony of the novel is that Saleem does not truly affect the tides of history – he only believes he does. An early episode in the novel highlights Saleem's "relationship" to history. In a chapter entitled "Love in Bombay," Saleem gives an account of his youthful infatuation with an American girl, Evie Burns. He assures the reader of the importance of this account by noting that "if Evie had not come to live amongst us, my story might never have progressed beyond tourist-in-a-clocktower and cheating in class . . . and then there would have been no climax in a widows' hostel, no clear proof of my meaning" (Rushdie's ellipsis *M* 181). As with many moments in the novel, Saleem insists on seeing a pattern, on constructing a coherent narrative from a vast array of people and experiences. This propensity also accounts for the numerous digressions he feels compelled to address along the way, striving to make his whole life cohere to a narrative framework he has imposed upon it.

Since his narrative is consciously coupled to that India, he undertakes to imbue each moment of his life, no matter how trivial, with some relevance to the nation's history. Such is the case with his obsession with Evie. While trying to impress her with his newly-acquired bicycle-riding skills, Saleem attempts to read Evie's thoughts. She responds by shouting "Get out!" and pushing the bicycle, with Saleem aboard, downhill, straight into a crowd demonstrating for linguistic freedoms in the newly-divided country. Finding himself amongst a throng of inhospitable rioters, Saleem recites the one line of Gujarati he knows, "*How are you? – I am well! – I'll take a stick and thrash you to hell!*", a phrase the

rioters soon adopt for their mantra as they confront their opponents (M 191).

Saleem thus concludes: "In this way, I became directly responsible for triggering off the violence which ended with the partition of the state of Bombay" (M 192).

The reader quickly perceives the solipsism in this reading of events, and that the riots would no doubt have occurred, as would the partition of Bombay, without Saleem's participation.

Despite Saleem's assertions, however, the reader quickly assesses that the narrator is someone to whom things are done rather than someone who does things. Read in this light, the narrative is Saleem's way of asserting control over his life and gaining agency over an indifferent History. Saleem lessens the impact of the uncertainty that plagues him through an arrangement of facts that validates his existence and his identity. Early in the novel, for example, he recognizes this fact when he concedes that "Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge" (M 19). The "trick" he has found is that of creating probable, though not necessarily verifiable, fictions that highlight the hybridized and diverse world to which he belongs.

Saleem has created a context for his narrative, but in order for it to be considered legitimate, his tale requires external validation. To borrow Bouson's phrase, Saleem exhibits the narcissist's "urgent desire for an empathetic listener" (4). His narrative is a plea for confirmation of his perceptions and his interpretations, but also of his essential self. Saleem needs Padma to keep his

version of history in check, but he also needs someone to "receive" his communication, thereby giving his story credence. Saleem also appeals to an idealized reader, someone other than Padma, to accept his message and to "swallow" him and his story.

At times, we also read Saleem's narrative as a reflection of the narcissist's struggle for self-preservation or ego-survival. This anxiety is revealed, foremost, in his contention that cracks are forming on his body and he will soon fall to pieces. This bears a good deal of similarity to what Kohut has labeled the narcissist's "disintegration anxiety," which is strongly tied to the fear of the loss of self (Bouson 4). But there is also his assertion that he is at the center of things and everything revolves around him. Saleem speaks of his "place at the centre of the universe," and we are likely to interpret this as the grandiose expression of a narcissist.¹⁵

Displaying the true characteristics of the narcissist, Saleem fluctuates between feelings of heroism or grandiosity and those of worthlessness or impotence (Bouson 65). His sexual impotence, brought on at the hands of the Widow, is a reflection of the fears of writerly inadequacy impeding the creation of his narrative. Rushdie makes this explicit early in the novel. In response to Padma's amorous advances, Saleem notes that he is "unmanned." And Padma makes a direct connection between sex and writing, between Saleem's penis and his pen: "So now that the writery is done, let's see if we can make your other pencil work!" (M 39). Humor aside, Saleem is not even certain that his *other* pencil

works and that his narrative will be strong enough to counteract the tide of Indian history. These feelings of inadequacy are counterbalanced, however, by the occasional moment of grandiosity. On more than one occasion, for example, Saleem formulates a link between himself and the great prophets of the past. Since greatness has been foisted on him by the accident of his birth, Saleem searches constantly for signs that will confirm that greatness. When he begins hearing voices, he immediately assumes that they are the voices of archangels (M 164). Identifying himself with Moses and Mohammed, Saleem sees his mission as divinely inspired. Saleem declares: "Until at last I saw the shawl of genius fluttering down, like an embroidered butterfly, the mantle of greatness settling upon my shoulders" (M 163). At such times, he reveals his narcissistic urges, something we should keep in mind as we read. He is entirely invested in the construction of this narrative, since it is as much an act of self-preservation or auto-hagiography as it is one of historiography. In the meantime, however, these feelings of grandiosity fill Saleem with a conviction that his vision of India is the right one. The day India becomes truly pluralist will only confirm what he knew all along.

Saleem's most grandiose gesture is to identify himself directly with the nation. Meditating on Nehru's message - "Your life, which will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" - Saleem is troubled by the presence of the qualifier. "*In what sense?*" he asks himself. Searching for an answer, he declares, "actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was

inextricably entwined in my world" (M 238). The "modes of connection" he outlines are not quantifiably different from those any individual might construct to explain his or her relationship with the world, but through this schematic, Saleem is able to construct links between every part of his life and that of India. His life is connected "actively-literally," through actions he performs that directly impinge on the nation's development, as in the case of the language rioters or, later, the pepperpots in Pakistan. He is connected "passively-metaphorically" by being born at the exact instant of India's independence, and thus his growth mirrors the nation's growth. The "passively-literally" context emerges in moments when something the nation does affects him directly, as with the deaths in his family during the war. Finally, he perceives connections "actively-metaphorically," in events that occur to him that seem to reflect events happening to the nation. Thus, in reply to the question - in what sense? - Saleem signifies in *every* sense. Such a realization only leads to the conclusion that he *is* India.

His narrative thus becomes a search for confirmation and acceptance of what Saleem sees himself as representing - a pluralistic, secularist, and democratic India. The telling of the tale reflects both personal and political motivations. His sense of self is intrinsically tied to the nation's future; seeing himself as "indissolubly linked" to the nation means that his fate will, in effect, reflect the fate of the nation. Again, some truth can be extracted from such a statement, for if individuals such as Saleem (Mian Abdullah, Picture Singh) are simply

destroyed, exiled, or allowed to crumble to dust, then the nation will have truly forsaken its most vital element - its diverse population.

This vision is threatened, of course, by Indira Gandhi who also casts herself in the role of India. But if Indira is India, then the country is far different from the one dreamed of by Saleem and Rushdie. Saleem's imagined conflict with Indira Gandhi over their respective centrality to India's history is, in effect, a metaphor for the clash between pluralist and unitary visions of the nation. In fact, Saleem's solipsistic reading of history leads him to consider that Mrs. Gandhi merely wishes to co-opt the role conferred upon Saleem by her father:

did Saleem's dream of saving the nation leak, through the osmotic tissues of history, into the thoughts of the Prime Minister herself?

Was my lifelong belief in the equation between the State and myself transmuted in 'the Madam's' mind, into that in-those-days-famous phrase: *India is Indira and Indira is India*? Were we competitors for centrality - was she gripped by a lust for meaning as profound as my own - and was that, was that why . . . ?" (M 420)

By constructing this direct opposition with the Prime Minister, Saleem makes clear that each is involved in a parallel activity, and striving to impose a particular vision (fiction?) onto the canvas that is India. To this end, Saleem contends that the destruction of the midnight's children was, in fact, largely motivated by Indira Gandhi's desire to rid herself of her competition, of the true representative(s) of India: "but might she not have read her own father's letter to

a midnight child, in which her own, sloganized centrality was denied; in which the role of mirror-of-the-nation was bestowed upon me?" (427). Like Mrs. Gandhi, Saleem is so invested in saving or preserving this idea of India because he *is* India, in the sense that his identity, his entire self-conception, is directly tied to that particular version of the country.

At the same time, we are also likely to perceive such outbursts as a combination of paranoia and narcissism. Is it truly possible that either individual conceives of himself as a perfect embodiment of nation? We tend to read Saleem's narrative with a certain degree of incredulity, sifting for the truth in the self-preserving declarations of a solipsist. Saleem's imagined centrality is a complete fiction, whereas the Prime Minister's was in fact broadcast to the nation (Wolpert 411). The juxtaposition, as Michael Gorra points out, serves to put in question the authority of any such declaration: "As we acknowledge the absurdity of Saleem's claim to be India, so should we recognize that of Mrs. Gandhi's own as well" (146). Once again, we see that the text seeks to undermine any absolutist or essentialist vision of the nation and create a space wherein alternate conceptions may find room to grow. By proposing an alternative narrative to Mrs. Gandhi's, Saleem informs the nation that its fate is not determined by her dynastic vision and that neither factionalism nor communalist violence need be intrinsic parts of the life of the nation.

Though the text warns against an uncritical acceptance of official history, it also exposes its own limitations as a discourse on the past. Despite the metaphor

of competition, Saleem does not intend to replace Indira Gandhi's version of India with his own. As he observes, "There are as many versions of India as Indians" (M 269). As Rushdie tells an interviewer, Saleem's India is just one in a multitude of Indias: "I wanted to make it clear that Saleem's (the narrator's) version is just one version. And it is, like any version, occasionally suspect. I thought by creating a tension between the narrative voice and the form of the book I would be able to prevent the novel from being read as a kind of attempt to be an oracle" (Kumar 35). By highlighting, consciously and unconsciously, his own propensity for distortion, Saleem points to the very same tendencies in other forms of discourse. Saleem's comments on historiography, the presence of Padma as narratee, and the factual errors that litter the narrative, all serve to imbue the reader with a healthy skepticism towards the validity of the text as historical document.

Throughout the novel, for example, there are moments when Saleem can be seen to manipulate the past openly to suit his ends. And he makes no attempt to disguise the true purpose of his narrative. Rushdie says of his narrator that "he sets out to *write himself*, in the hope that by doing so he may achieve the significance that the events of his adulthood have drained from him. He is no dispassionate, disinterested chronicler. He wants so to shape his material that the reader will be forced to concede his central role" (IH 24). But Saleem never makes any pretense of not having an agenda; from the start the scaffolding of his edifice is always there for the reader to see. The numerous instances of self-

referentiality highlight for the reader the precise means by which history is made to tell a particular tale.

And at moments in the text, Saleem openly tampers with the past. Initiating what would become known as "the Sabarmati episode," Saleem sends a letter to Homi Catrack informing him of his wife's infidelities. The message is constructed, in the classic style of ransom notes, from words clipped from the newspapers. Saleem proudly refers to the moment as "my first attempt at rearranging history" (M 260). The statement suggests that this is only one in a series of such rearrangements, the latest being the novel itself. Another narratorial incident in the text points to Saleem's awareness of his own distorted vision. Near the end of the novel, Saleem recounts the events leading up to Shiva's death. A couple of pages later, however, Saleem admits to having lied to the reader. Shiva did not die and Saleem does not know what happened to him. Stating that Shiva had been murdered momentarily filled him with pleasure, but he acknowledges that he "fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one's memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred" (M 443). These are moments when Saleem consciously manipulates the past, but what of those occasions when he is not so cognizant of his need to have history unfold in a particular manner?

Both he and the reader are made aware of just such a possibility when Saleem suddenly recognizes that his narrative contains factual errors. One such moment

occurs when Saleem realizes that he has gotten a significant date in India's history wrong. He nevertheless refuses to correct the mistake: "The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (*M* 166). Saleem thus acknowledges his document as a personalized version of the past and that it may not be an accurate reflection of the way events actually unfolded.¹⁶ At the same time, he recognizes that his desire for a satisfactory narrative may cripple his credibility: "Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything - to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?" (*M* 166). Rushdie would no doubt answer in the negative for the first question and in the positive for the second. He notes that Saleem's obvious errors are "a way of telling the reader to maintain a healthy distrust" (*IH* 25). But this does not invalidate Saleem's entire narrative, but rather points to the inherent limitations of any historical reconstruction, whether it is created to satisfy personal or political motives.

While instilling doubt in the reader's mind through these various techniques and while admitting that his version is just as flawed as any other, Saleem is also convinced that it may be truer than any other. Justifying the veracity of his narrative, Saleem declares to the idealized reader,

I told you the truth . . . Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it craves its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events, and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (M 211)

Rushdie's endorsement of plurality against any univocal expression demands, of course, that he follow the same strictures in his own writing. The uncertainty that colors Saleem's narrative, however, is not always persuasive. At times, it reads more like a stance than a conviction. Saleem's arguing with himself as to whether certain events occurred or not, while revealing the limitations of his or any other historical discourse, are not sufficient to undermine completely the assuredness with which he tells his narrative. Thus, near the end of the novel, Saleem can declare, "It happened that way because that's how it happened" (M 461).

Simply to replace one narrative with another would defeat Rushdie's purpose. His text must exist as a third element; it must somehow encompass all dualities. Thus, the inclusion and interjections of official history indicate the possible coexistence of different ideologies and readings of the past.¹⁷ Coexistence aside, Saleem does intend (as does Rushdie) to paint a particular portrait of the nation. While the content of his text asserts the multiplicity of India, the form of the text implies that this is the true unseen nation, the one that

has been so often misrepresented in historical and political narratives. It is perhaps here that Rushdie is at his most paradoxically postmodern, for while he claims to eschew all metanarratives about the nation, ultimately his text is precisely that – a metanarrative that seeks to celebrate and privilege the heterogeneity of India.

An Indian Disease and the Chutnification of History

Midnight's Children can be characterized as a novel with countervailing impulses. The novel seeks to privilege the productive possibilities of fragmentation while simultaneously investing itself in the stability provided by its unified form. Rushdie privileges hybridity and multiformity with a centripetal moving away from the center. At the same time, Saleem's first-person narration provides a centrifugal "organizing intelligence" that strives to give form to the chaos. One might wonder whether these conflicting impulses can ever truthfully be reconciled. The conclusion of the novel, colored by the disempowering of the midnight's children literally through sterilization and Saleem's disintegration, suggests that the effort is too great and that the text can never compete with monolithic conceptions of life and identity, both private and public. The last part of this chapter will examine the novel's conclusion and address the debate surrounding whether it is to be read optimistically or pessimistically.

Invested as he is in the concept of "unity in diversity," Saleem's text possesses an organizational structure that reflects both propensities. The challenge facing the author is to find the means to represent the paradox of a nation that is unified through its inherent resistance to unification or indeed any monolithic conceptualization of national identity. The degree to which he succeeds is dependent upon Rushdie's distinctly Indian (but also Shandean) approach to his material. Through numerous digressions, characters who disappear as quickly as they appear, and storylines that simply fade without conclusion, Rushdie communicates what he calls "a jostle of stories":

when I wrote *Midnight's Children*, one of the ideas I had about it was that the simple fact about India is that the first thing to think about India is its multitude, its crowd, and I thought: 'how do you tell a crowd of stories?'. 'What is the literary equivalent of that multitude?' One strategy that was literally adopted in that book was deliberately to tell, as it were, too many stories, so that there was a jostle of stories in the novel and that your main narration, your main storyline, had to kind of force its way through the crowd . . . You have to have this sense in the novel of profligacy, there's just so much lying around, and that was an attempt not to show off, or not only to show off, but also to try and represent the reality that novel was describing. (Niven 234)

Rushdie's project - his "novel of profligacy" - is thus political to the extent that he believes the "reality" of India has been misconstrued and misrepresented. The text reflects his compulsion to depict a "true" image of the nation, spawned from his belief that what makes India truly India is slowly being eradicated by persistent reductionist/essentialist/communalist tendencies within the country. Thus, the very malleability of the text emphasizes the fallibility of any system that would claim to encompass, and thus identify, the nation.

At the same time, "India," "Saleem," and Saleem's text are all containers fabricated to "swallow," with varying degrees of success, the multitudinousness of Indian life. Rushdie presents this desire to encapsulate the whole as an Indian rather than a Western propensity. At one point, for example, Saleem declares: "As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences . . . It is a sort of national longing for form - or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes" (*M* 300).¹⁸ But the content always exceeds the form imposed upon it. Saleem cannot truly hope to encompass India, only his idea of India. The two ideas are intertwined, however, since one of the specific points of Saleem's narrative is that India is uncontainable and therefore not subject to any narrative that would seek to reduce it to a set of essential elements. Since one of Rushdie's objectives is to demonstrate that no one version of India can ever hope to contain it, we can assume that he thinks no differently about his own attempt. Nevertheless, most

of us probably read the novel as one individual's attempt to incorporate as much as he can in a single fictive vision.

Midnight's Children is populated by ambitious artist-figures who suffer from the author's self-proclaimed "encyclopedic" tendencies and who struggle to find the means to present the whole world in their art.¹⁹ Early in the novel, while describing Nadir Khan's experiences on the night of Mian Abdullah's assassination, Saleem offers the reader an anecdotal aside: "As a young man [Khan] had shared a room with a painter whose paintings had grown larger and larger as he tried to get the whole of life into his art. 'Look at me,' he said before he killed himself, 'I wanted to be a miniaturist and I've got elephantiasis instead!'" (M 48-9). The fixation that takes hold of the painter is one that is revisited upon various characters in the novel, including Saleem. The anecdote serves as a warning, underlining the impossibility of the task. The search for meaning and a concept that will contain all of reality causes a number of characters to suffer also from "elephantiasis." Rushdie characterizes this pursuit to capture the whole as an obsession rather than a choice, in this particular case causing such intense dissatisfaction that it leads to suicide. For instance, Saleem tells of Lifafa Das, a travelling presenter of peepshows whose call to attract customers might well describe Saleem's own project: "Come see everything, come see everything, come see! Come see Delhi, come see India, come see! Come see, come see!" (M 73). Saleem sees Das's enterprise as analogous to that of Khan's painter-friend and wonders: "is this an Indian disease, this urge to

encapsulate the whole of reality? Worse: am I infected too?" (M 75). The answer to Saleem's question is, of course, yes. While Saleem does not seek to identify this desire as uniquely Indian, he does suggest that the degree to which it possesses Indians may well be. And despite the negative connotations of words like "disease" and "infected," it is precisely this affliction that gives Saleem's narration its charm.

Saleem's text is nothing if not an attempt to capture the disordered, chaotic, and infinitely diverse elements that make up the nation. In fact, his telepathic powers would seem to be ideal for assuaging the encyclopedic impulses afflicting Indians in particular. These abilities, augmented by Saleem's various incarnations (Snotnose, Buddha), appear to make him ideally suited for such an undertaking. But in a line that foreshadows his eventual disintegration, Saleem reveals the stress he undergoes in attempting to assimilate the multitudes: "My voices," Saleem observes, "far from being sacred, turned out to be as profane, and as multitudinous as dust" (M 168). In a struggle to make sense of these voices Saleem assumes the centrality of the artist; he channels the country through his own being. The voices he imagines he hears may be nothing more than an indication of the growth of his own aesthetic sensibilities. He speaks of "the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space inside my head" (M 168). At moments like these Saleem himself becomes a container of the whole, with everything and everyone coexisting somewhat peaceably within him. The text becomes a reflection of

both Saleem's capacity to contain these multitudes and the potential for communal harmony.

Taking refuge from the world in his clocktower, Saleem experiments with his newly-acquired abilities. In a passage that takes more than a page in the novel, Saleem describes his adventures as he telepathically roams the country, seeing into the minds of a wide range of the population:

Dugdugee-drums rattled in my left (damaged) ear as I gained my first glimpse of the Taj Mahal through the eyes of a fat Englishwoman suffering from the tummy-runs; after which, to balance south against north, I hopped down to Madurai's Meenakshi temple and nestled against the wooly, mystical perceptions of a chanting priest. I toured Connaught Place in New Delhi in the guise of an auto-rickshaw driver, complaining bitterly to my fares about the rising price of gasoline; in Calcutta I slept in a section of drainpipe. (M 173)

Saleem goes on to describe his experiences in the minds of adolescent boys, film stars, cricketers, and politicians. He glimpses life briefly through their eyes, gaining empathy with the people who populate the narrative he tells. But these are not so much individuals as people Saleem becomes. The use of the personal pronouns implies that Saleem is living these incidents himself rather than living through someone else. Reflecting his own mongrelized condition, Saleem briefly

embodies the world he wishes to preserve and explains that it can be the way he wishes it to be:

the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were *mine*, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that, as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first-class radio station poured into me, I was somehow *making them happen* . . . which is to say, I had entered into the illusion of the artist, and thought of the multitudinous realities of the land as the raw unshaped material of my gift. (M 174)

He is aware, however, that such diversity cannot be filtered adequately through one controlling consciousness. Thus, this flight of the imagination culminates with Saleem exclaiming, "I am the bomb in Bombay . . . watch me explode!" (Rushdie's ellipsis M 174).

That the author willfully undermines Saleem's pursuits does not take away from the value he perceives in such an activity. Rushdie self-consciously recognizes the impossibility of the artistic endeavor of imposing order on the chaos. All of these artists, including Saleem, know that their efforts are destined to fail. Nevertheless, the very striving to encapsulate the whole world guarantees the revelation of things otherwise hidden. The constant jostling of elements that would not normally come into contact with each other is the primary component in the birth of the new. If things are kept pure and not

exposed to difference and variance, then stasis ensues and change becomes impossible. It is the artist's encyclopedic instinct that offers ultimately the greatest resistance to this threat.

It is no surprise that a text so self-consciously fixated on its own process would eventually pause to assess the degree of its own success. It is also no surprise that this moment should come when Saleem's narrative, which began in 1917, finally catches up to the present day and the time of its telling in 1979. Saleem takes stock of what he calls his "chutnification of history," comparing his narratorial approach to the process of preparing chutney. Each chapter is likened to a jar enclosing its own specific flavors: "Every pickle-jar (you will forgive me if I become florid for a moment) contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time!" (*M* 459). Throughout the novel, Saleem voices his fear in the amnesiac potential of the population. Since they are "a nation of forgetters" the probability of the official version becoming the only version is exceedingly high.²⁰ His "pickling" becomes his way of counteracting this possibility. Comparing his daytime pickle-making to the writing of his text, Saleem notes that "Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks" (*M* 38). The notion of preservation is reiterated throughout the final chapter as Saleem contends that "in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories" (*M* 459). The text, with its thirty chapters, is also an act of self-preservation. As alternative history, the jars form a document meant to stand as a reminder of the

paths not taken, repressed, or unexplored. As Saleem observes, the jars "stand upon a shelf, waiting to be unleashed upon an amnesiac nation" (M 460). They represent Saleem's efforts to preserve himself for posterity. Their multitude and variety embody the differences existing within him, differences that are increasingly threatened.

And although he admits "distortions are inevitable with both methods," Saleem also communicates his conviction that he has, in fact, succeeded in accomplishing his goal. As James Harrison points out, throughout *Midnight's Children* Rushdie does privilege the creativity of women in manipulating food and extracting from the tasters a wide range of emotions. In a novel with a number of failed "artists," these cooks are unmitigated successes. Saleem, in his role of pickle-maker, should be ranked among them. Harrison notes that chutney-making is "raised to the level of an art by so many other characters in the novel that we are surely meant to see in a more positive light [Saleem's] ambition to capture the thirty years of his life in thirty chapters and in thirty different flavors, each in its own jar" (65-6). Thus, despite whatever ambivalence Saleem may express at various points throughout the novel, we must accept that chutney-makers may have found the recipe for communicating a version of the truth.

Saleem does readily acknowledge that his particular version of the past may not be to everyone's taste. The correlation with the creation of this novel of many textures and moods will not escape the reader - in fact, Saleem makes sure that it

does not. Speaking of himself in the third person, he notes: "Sometimes in the pickles' version of history, Saleem appears to have known too little; at other times, too much . . . yes, I should revise and revise, improve and improve, but there is neither the time nor the energy. I am obliged to offer no more than this stubborn sentence: It happened that way because that's how it happened" (M 460-1). Pickle-making, like the writing of history, gives form to its elements. The maker chooses what elements to include, when to include them, and in what measure. Rushdie's novel thus highlights the subjective aspects of historical reconstruction that is subject to "inevitable distortions."

It is nevertheless the form that is most important when Rushdie defends his novel against charges of nihilism and despair. In an interview with John Haffenden, Rushdie elaborates upon the tentative relationship that exists between the pickle-maker/writer and the taster/reader: "I think the writer has a kind of vision which he tries to project on to other people, and the fit between that vision and other people's is the tension between the writer and the reader. As a writer I am trying to say, 'This is the shape of how it is,' and the more I can persuade you that that *is* how it is, the greater my success" (246-7). Thus, for all the irresolution that critics contend Rushdie maintains, it is also important to identify the extent to which he is involved in an act of persuasion. Saleem's affirmation - "It happened that way because that's how it happened" - is analogous to Rushdie's desire to have the reader at least consider his version as the right one. Of course, he will not say that his version is the right one, such a

declaration in a novel that subverts totalizing narratives would be absurd. But he wishes the reader nonetheless to entertain the possibility. Saleem makes his artistic credo explicit:

To pickle is to give immortality, after all: fish, vegetables, fruit hang embalmed in spice-and-vinegar; a certain alteration, a slight intensification of taste, is a small matter, surely? The art is to change the flavour in degree, but not in kind; and above all (in my thirty jars and a jar) to give it shape and form – that is to say, meaning. (I have mentioned my fear of absurdity.)

One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say of them that they possess the authentic taste of truth . . . that they are, despite everything, acts of love.

(Rushdie's ellipsis *M* 461)

The "pickles of history" are, of course, the diverse and myriad elements Saleem has assembled in constructing his text. By measuring and blending these elements, he creates a specific object – chutney – that confers meaning upon the disparate and chaotic aspects of national life. The pickles, despite being made from combinations of various incompatible ingredients, eventually take on a particular flavor of their own; that is, they homogenize everything into a singular sensation. While recognizing the perils and limitations of pickle-making, Saleem

nevertheless is convinced that they will "possess the authentic taste of truth," and that the reader will finally extract meaning from this concoction.²¹ The offering of these chapters/jars as "acts of love" mitigates any reading of the text as only a solipsistic, self-interested exercise. Once again, we see that Saleem does not wish to rewrite history, he merely wants to give it a slightly different taste, "in degree, but not in kind."

In the final pages of his narration, Saleem seeks to justify and vindicate his project, asserting that his "chutnification of history" has been a success despite the challenges that confronted him when he swallowed the world. The unifying powers of narration are once again flaunted in the face of the fragmented existence we all live. At the same time, however, the novel has made clear that any attempt at a totalizing narrative is doomed to its cracks and fissures. In the last paragraph of his text, Saleem predicts his own total disintegration; unable to contain the world, he will crack and break under the strain.

Saleem also leaves the thirty-first jar empty and the novel is without closure. The final paragraphs of the text are written in the future tense and thus are not actually contained within the boundaries of the text. The events recounted exist beyond what the text can truly know. The image of the empty jar, the container rather than the contained, implies that history may not necessarily turn out the way Saleem predicts. In this manner, Rushdie leaves open the possibilities of the text. Since no version can be *the* version, fixity is resisted in those final moments. The ending with its signature Rushdiean explosion is projected but not

actualized. Compelled to end his narrative and "to write the future" (M 462), he acknowledges the power of time and history as it moves unceasingly forth. But Saleem cannot confer an ending on his narrative since he does not know how it will end, for him or others. Thus, the text does not necessarily support his apocalyptic ending. Though he wishes to imbue the ending with a particular "flavor," he recognizes it "cannot be pickled, because it has not taken place" (M 462).

The image of the crowd in all its "many-headed multitudes . . . without boundaries, growing until it fills the world" pervades the last two pages of the novel, asserting its diversity and plurality (M 462). The key figures of the narrative are suddenly assembled in the crowd and contribute to Saleem's disintegration, but this event must be seen as metaphoric since some of them are dead and others, like Jamila, are unlikely to be there. In effect, the penultimate paragraph attempts to do what the entire novel has failed to accomplish – swallow the world. The final image of the novel with Saleem being reduced "to specks of voiceless dust" by the crowd is as much a comment on the textuality of history as anything else in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem cannot contain the world any more than a text can hope to unify the multitudinous past.

Pessimism or Optimism? Tragedy or Comedy?:

The Ending of *Midnight's Children*

The final words of the novel invoke a feeling of ambivalence. In a blending of contradictory terms, Saleem completes his narrative: "it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace" (463). These words cause the reader to pause and consider the extent to which the children including Saleem might be considered masters or victims. The lack of peace, in life and death, would presumably lead most readers to prefer the latter identification.

If the novel is in fact a tale of supremely wasted potential then it might rightfully be considered a modern tragedy. The seeming victory of the forces of singularity, embodied in Indira Gandhi's dictatorial control of the nation, drains the very text, like its titular children, of any sense of hope. A number of critics have thus interpreted the novel as an unrelentingly bleak assessment of the failure of Nehru's socialist secular dream. Rushdie disputes this reading, however, contending that the form of the novel, one that accentuates heterogeneity and multiplicity, counteracts the tale of Saleem's disintegration and foresees a future still full of potential. Clearly the destruction of the *Midnight's Children* Conference is meant to be read as a path not taken, but Rushdie insists there are still plenty of paths remaining. Arguing that he does

not see the novel as "despairing or nihilistic," he emphasizes the underlying tension between the form and content of the novel:

The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it 'teems.' The form – multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country – is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem's personal tragedy. I do not think that a book written in such a manner can really be called a despairing work. (IH 16)²²

The question is, then, why have so many readers missed the optimism Rushdie intended to communicate at the end of the novel? Does the notion of "non-stop self-regeneration" truly counteract the images of obliteration that dominate the last part of the novel? Typically, the two aspects of the plot that contribute to a pessimistic reading of the text are the destruction of the Midnight's Children Conference and Saleem's predicted disintegration. Since both the Conference and Saleem are unmitigated symbols for independent India's potential, their respective eradication seem to offer a dark portent of the nation's future. Both the Conference and Saleem are replaced in the text by the Midnite-Confidential Club and Aadam Sinai respectively. In a novel filled with images of rebirth, one might be tempted to see these transfers as simply two more instances of hopeful progress. If the Midnite-Confidential Club is indeed meant to replace the

Conference, it is a shallow substitute; Rushdie cannot help himself from parodying what he perceives as the worst aspects of India's modernization.

The fate of the Conference seems to contain the basic elements of tragedy. A group of children with apparently magical and limitless potential achieve nothing; in fact, they are destined to be forgotten by history. But what do the virtual absence of the midnight's children and their apparent ineffectiveness, in a novel that bears their name, tell us about the first thirty years of India's independence? The children represent both the surge of optimism that accompanied the birth of the nation and an untapped potential for newness that does not enter the world. Other than Saleem, Shiva and Parvati, the 578 remaining children play no stated role in the unfolding of the narrative. Their early squabbles reveal the fissures and differences that prevent the country from unifying. The conference is pulled apart by the same divisive forces that affect India in its attempts to become a homogenous nation. Their destruction at the end of the novel, through sterilization and sperectomy ("the draining of all hope"), serves a largely symbolic purpose in Rushdie's text. And Saleem's own disintegration confirms the eventual victory of fragmentation over any attempt at unification, implying that there is no true way of narrating the nation. His endeavor to present an alternate version of history seems doomed to forgetfulness, as the individual is overrun and reduced to voiceless dust by the amnesiac masses.

A hopeful reading of the novel hinges on this perception – that the preservation of the text, all that it represents and endorses, ultimately outweighs the devastation depicted in the final pages of Saleem's narrative. Much critical emphasis has been invested, including by Rushdie himself, in the capacity of Saleem's text to embody what he himself cannot. From this perspective, the narrative succeeds in communicating the idea that the multifarious components of the text can be unified and that, in fact, the best mirror of the nation is not Saleem, nor *Midnight's Children*, but the text itself.

Rushdie has written, to use Hutcheon's phrase, a totalizing anti-totalizing narrative. While he constantly undermines Saleem's narrative, he just as frequently privileges its conclusions. So while the novel may raise doubts about any official history or the power of any one voice to speak for the nation, its conclusion reveals Rushdie's anxiety that this may be precisely the fate to which India is destined.²³ Rushdie's concession that the Emergency has left its stain on the novel reveals the very feelings of pessimism the author seeks to counteract in the writing of the text.

But Rushdie does not rely only on the formal aspects of his text to communicate his optimism. Near the end of the novel, he introduces Aadam, the offspring of a liaison between Shiva and Parvati but considered by Saleem to be his son (in the same way that he was Ahmed Sinai's son-not-his-son). While Saleem recognizes the failures of his generation, he holds out hope that things will be different for the next: "We, the children of Independence, rushed wildly

and too fast into our future; he, Emergency-born, will be is already cautious, biding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist" (M 425). And there is a sense in which Aadam and Durga, his nursemaid, represent the new. In fact, Saleem is somewhat frightened of Durga since she represents a world that is moving on and quickly forgets about yesterday: "Her name, even before I met her, had the smell of new things; she represented novelty, beginnings, the advent of new stories, events complexities, and I was no longer interested in anything new" (M 445). The novel is filled with images of rebirth because they allow the author to play with the concept of ends and new beginnings. Rather than representing the end of the dream, the destruction of the Conference and Saleem's disintegration are framed as merely signals of the end of one stage and the start of another in India's development. Saleem's generation may have failed to fulfill the promise of Nehru's dream, but this does not signify that the dream is dead, merely that others must carry it out.²⁴

The dilemma for Saleem, and to some degree Rushdie, is that he is unable to conceive precisely what form this new nation will take. As he tells the reader, "the nearly-thirty-one-year-old myth of freedom is no longer what it was. New myths are needed; but that's none of my business" (M 457-8). However, the same fate is reserved for Aadam; in Saleem's last vision, he is also trampled under the feet of the crowd. How newness enters the world is a question that will continue to trouble Rushdie and serve as the impetus for the writing of *The Satanic Verses*. That Saleem the mongrel and the midnight's children prove incapable of

bringing about a new India is an impasse that Rushdie is not entirely willing to face. The evident disappointment he experiences when he considers India's lost opportunities, provides him no other alternative but to hold out hope for the future, even if there are no obvious reasons for doing so. Rushdie's emphasizing of form over content reads as wishful thinking, as placing one's faith in the capacity of the container to alter the quality of the contained. It can certainly make it more bearable, but it cannot alter the essence of the tales told or the facts presented. It is as though Rushdie himself falls victim to the "optimism disease," half-believing that narrating it can make it so.

In contrast to Byatt and McEwan's texts, then, the narrative of *Midnight's Children* disintegrates at the final stages. Whereas *Possession* and *Black Dogs* seek finally a sense of coherence and closure, a reversion to traditional narrative form, Rushdie's novel breaks down from the tensions of trying to keep it together. The conclusion of each of these novels highlights the centripetal and centrifugal forces that exist at their centers. Straining to bring the diverse elements of their narratives together, the protagonists of these three novels are intrinsically aware that these very same elements are constantly straining to pull the text apart.

Saleem's "chutnification of history" is an appropriate metaphor for what all these narrators set out to do. Each strives in his or her own way to create a recipe for historical truth with a tale that will elicit some type of communal consensus, or at least communal rethinking. The creation of each narrative is compelled by a desire to appease an anxiety but also to establish a moral

framework within which meaning is created and judgements have not been divested of all value. Saleem's acknowledgment that his chutneys may not be to everyone's taste does not negate their potency for they may "possess the authentic taste of truth." Much the same observation can be made about the other texts. Their metafictional aspects highlight an awareness of the narrative's provisional and contingent status, while simultaneously insuring a temporary consideration of the text's truth-value.

These novels attempt, in different ways, to come to grips with our present vexed and uncertain relationship to our past or its many possible pasts. While events of the twentieth century have compelled Byatt to question the nature of our relationship with the past, these same events cause McEwan to reevaluate our present while prompting Rushdie to ponder the possibility of narrating a future. The conclusion of each of these novels reflects its respective author's faith in narrative's ability to configure the past as a means of controlling our present and future. The coherence and closure afforded the readers of *Possession* are meant to contrast directly with Roland and Maud's, and our, contemporary state of indeterminacy. This implies that if we can abandon some of our theoretical and postmodern aloofness we just may be able to recuperate some of the intensity and vitality of our Victorian ancestors. McEwan strives to demonstrate that, despite our best efforts and wishes, the past and present are inextricably linked and that only by recognizing the commonality we share with that past will we be prepared for what awaits us in the future. Jeremy's narration serves

to create links with the past that are often overlooked for any number of reasons. The ending of the novel, with its dramatic reiteration of June's vision of the black dogs, insists that we must not dissociate ourselves from the guilt of the past but strive to make it our own. Finally, Rushdie steadfastly refuses to accept what the past tells him about the future of the nation. Instead, he strives to narrate another nation into existence. By creating a counternarrative to the version of modern India that is traditionally propagated by historians and politicians, Saleem urges his readers to believe that an alternate future, based on an alternate past, is indeed a possibility. Unfortunately, Saleem's narrative is unable to withstand the weight of the past and collapses under its own weight. The dark message communicated by the novel's conclusion negates the exuberance of the narration. Rushdie's faith in narrative is shown finally to be on shakier ground than even he is willing to admit.

Endnotes

- ¹ Speaking of his objectives in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie observes that a philosophy of plurality "can also lead to great weakness of purpose. So that one way of interpreting the story we are talking about, the story of the fall of Granada, is that here is this wonderful, pluralist, civilized culture. When it's faced with this narrow spectrum, obsessive, very focused fundamentalist attack, it disintegrates, gives up without a fight, doesn't have a chance" (Reder *Conversations* 207).
- ² Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Picador, 1981): 60, 85, 158. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, cited as *M*.
- ³ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991): 100. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, cited as *IH*.
- ⁴ David Price argues for such a reading when he stipulates that "*Midnight's Children* offers its readers a poietic history that presents a counternarrative of the accepted notions of history that, among other things, focuses on the forgotten possibilities of the past" (123).
- ⁵ See Metcalf and Metcalf, 218-9.
- ⁶ Rushdie argues that *The Satanic Verses* elicited so much antagonism because the novel "celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Melange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world*. . . . It is a love-song to our mongrel selves" (*IH* 394 Rushdie's emphasis). Such a thematic statement could be readily applied to any of Rushdie's works.
- ⁷ In a review of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, for example, entitled "Palimpsest Regained," J. M. Coetzee contends that Rushdie "is far from being a

programmatic postmodernist" because he is actually "disinclined to treat the historical record as one among many" (15).

⁸ This may help explain some of the Western confusion surrounding *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie's palimpsesting the Koran, and the Islamic response to the novel.

⁹ Though he never uses the word "palimpsest," David Lipscomb demonstrates that Stanley Wolpert's *A New History of India* (1977) is the official historical document over which Rushdie's alternative version is written/layered. In an extended appendix, Lipscomb provides a series of passages from Wolpert's study that find their way (almost word for word) into Rushdie's novel (183-86).

¹⁰ In the midst of describing the horrors, Saleem acknowledges, "trains run on time, black-money hoarders are frightened into paying taxes, even the weather is brought to heel, and bumper harvests are reached; there is, I repeat, a white part as well as a black" (M 434). In an interesting twist, a recent text on India's history, published in 2000, almost seems to palimpsest Rushdie's novel: "Office workers showed up on time; incidents of smuggling and tax evasion fell off dramatically; an enforced labour peace helped secure renewed industrial growth. Even the weather cooperated. A good monsoon in 1975 made possible a record harvest of 121 million tonnes of food grains, accompanied by a declining rate of inflation" (Metcalf and Metcalf, 250-51).

¹¹ In a 1983 interview with John Haffenden, Rushdie refers directly to the post-Independence years as a "betrayal" (249).

¹² See Lipscomb who refers to this space as Rushdie's "strange middle ground" (163).

¹³ In striving to define Rushdie's relationship with his homeland, critics have saddled the author with different labels. Among other things, Rushdie has been called a "diasporic writer" (Rege 251), a "cosmopolitan migrant" (Sanga 8), and a "cosmopolitan author" (Brennan 86).

- 14 Josna Rege observes that Rushdie "reaffirms and seeks to reclaim [Nehru's] ideals, even as he recognizes that their time may be past, and that he and his generation may be out of touch and out of time" (255).
- 15 Though we may laugh at Saleem's assertion, Damian Grant points out that it is not as farfetched as it may initially seem: "In a historical character the claim would be preposterous; for a fictional narrator it is a truism, a condition of his being at all" (40).
- 16 Later, Saleem gets the date of the general election of 1957 wrong (*M* 222). Rushdie tells Una Chaudhuri, "There are a lot of mistakes like that: they are consciously introduced mistakes. The texture of the narrative is such that it almost depends upon being an error about history; otherwise it wouldn't be an accurate piece of memory, because that's what narrative is: it's something remembered" (21).
- 17 As Brennan points out, the "all-inclusiveness" of the novel "finally undermines the idea of national distinctions themselves, which are orderly and bordered" (117).
- 18 Rushdie tells Michael Silverblatt, "I think the encyclopedist instinct . . . is one that I've always had as a writer. I've always thought that there are two ways of writing good books. One is to try to put the whole world in and fail obviously, but fail interestingly. As Beckett said, try again, fail better. Or to take one strand out of the hair of the world and look at that single strand in great detail and to find infinity in it. Now I, by and large, have tended to the former strategy" (Silverblatt 205).
- 19 The most obvious example is Aurora, the protagonist's flamboyant mother in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The discovery of her artistic talents occurs when she is punished and sent to her room for a week. During this time, she paints the walls of her room. When Camoens, her father, finally comes to fetch her he is amazed by what he finds: "But it is the great swarm of being itself," he exclaims (*Moor's* 59). He is awestruck by the expansiveness and inclusiveness of her artwork: "And it was all set in a landscape that made Camoens tremble to see it, for it was Mother India herself, Mother India with her garishness and her inexhaustible motion, Mother India who loved and betrayed and ate and destroyed and again

loved her children" (*Moor's* 60-1). Aurora's artwork throughout the novel is a mirror of Rushdie's own.

20 At one point, Saleem notes, "Today, the papers are talking about the supposed political rebirth of Mrs Indira Gandhi . . . Today, perhaps, we are already forgetting, sinking willingly into the insidious clouds of amnesia" (*M* 385).

21 See Price who suggests, "Saleem's description of the chutnification process emphasizes the necessity to make truths, truths that are sensed through the body. The eyes, and fingers, and the nose are sensing organs that help shape and form the very story that we narrate ourselves and declare to be true" (144).

22 On a number of occasions, Rushdie disputes the reading of the novel as either despairing or nihilistic. Speaking to T. Vijay Kumar, he admits that the novel has not always been read the way he would like it to be: "The point is that it is Saleem who gets pessimistic. The feeling of the book seems to me to be very affirmative in its abundance" (36). See also Rushdie's responses to Haffenden (244) and Chaudhuri (27).

23 Looking back at the novel in 1987, Rushdie makes the following observation: "It's a sad truth that nobody finds the novel's ending pessimistic any more, because what has happened in India since 1981 is so much darker than I had imagined. If anything, the book's last pages, with their suggestion of a new, more pragmatic generation rising up to take over from the midnight children, now seem absurdly, romantically optimistic" (*IH* 33). Seen in an historical context, which the novel more or less begs us to do, it is impossible not to read *Midnight's Children* as prophetic of the calamities that have plagued India since its publication. As Rushdie concedes, things have only gotten worse. *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), which one critic described as Rushdie's "bleakest book," certainly seems to have abandoned whatever hope the author held out for at the end of his earlier novel.

24 Hassumani sees Aadam and Durga as figures of hope for the future (42). Brennan makes a similar argument, casting Aadam as Ganesh and an embodiment of Rushdie's third principle (109-117).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I have chosen these novels because they are representative of their period, each in its own way, in addressing of present anxieties through an interaction with the historical past. There are a number of British (or, for that matter, American, French, German, Canadian) novels that also attempt to possess and re-narrate the past. A wide selection of texts might have been chosen to illuminate this paradigm: Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*, Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood*, Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*, Bruce Chatwin's *Utz*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, or Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*. Such a list only reveals the surface of what is truly an obsession in contemporary British writing. A study of any number of these novels would both expand and ameliorate this present study.

Many of these texts contend with both the desire to know and the anxiety of knowing the present. As such, we can read these novels, and they certainly invite us to do so as structural models by which to come to terms with our contemporary condition. For in the process of observing how these respective

narrators read the past and formulate their respective narrations, we acquire the means by which to undertake these activities ourselves. And the witnessing of the formulation of these narratives affords us a distance from which to reflect upon our own narrative processes, and the ways in which these contribute to conceptions of self.

These novels also investigate the construction of national narratives and their intertwinings with the narratives of individual's living within the nation. We should not be shocked, therefore, that one of the most clear-sighted assessments of Britain's post-war and post-imperial status should come from an "outsider," someone who does not fit a traditional notion of Britishness. Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, and immigrated to England with his parents when he was six-years old. As with Rushdie's early fiction, Ishiguro's first two novels are set in his native land. However, in his third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, he turns his gaze on his adopted homeland.

Through his protagonist, an aging butler named Stevens, he suggests that the historical past can be grasped and felt only through its manifestations in individuals. But he also highlights the role of repression, subjectivity, and blindness in limiting the successes of such an endeavor. In *The Remains of the Day*, history is the absence at the center of the text – an absence that wields an immutable force over the characters. For while Ishiguro has often been perceived as a writer of interiority, his characters are often emblematic of a particular ethos or way of living within history. For example, Stevens's self-

deception is analogous, in many ways, to that of the nation. His pursuit of dignity and restraint in the service of his master – two qualities often invoked as salient elements of Englishness – prevents him from recognizing his own potential, albeit limited, for contributing positively to history. In fact, his policy of not thinking for himself ultimately contributes to the unfolding of the "wrong" history, both on a personal and public level. Ishiguro undermines the idealization of pre-war England by demonstrating how fascism could have easily gained a foothold and how Stevens's quest for a professional ideal masks a self-destructive and paralyzing disengagement reflecting the zeitgeist of the nation. Darlington Hall becomes a metaphor for England; its decline after the war, and its consequent Americanization parallel those of the country. And Lord Darlington, with his philosophy of *rapprochement*, is also representative of a prevailing current of thought in England during the Thirties.

But Ishiguro contends that he is not so much dealing with history as with myth, a certain mythical kind of England, complete with peaceful villages, tea times and, of course, loyal butlers. He also claims that he is not "overwhelmingly interested in what really did happen. What's important is the emotional impact, the . . . position the characters take up at different points in the story, and why they need to take up these positions." This final point is significant because while the characters have personal reasons for creating their respective narratives, they also represent a larger segment of the population that responds to historical events in similar fashion. Stevens, in his role of butler, highlights the subservient

aspects of English culture (to tradition, to monarchy, to class). In his quest to become a "great" butler, he embodies many of the characteristics we associate with the English stereotype: unemotional, tight-lipped, honor-bound, self-deprecating. These very qualities, however, prevent Stevens from perceiving the mistakes made by his master. And the extent of his repression, his inability to grasp the obvious, casts his narrative in an ironic light. Irony distinguishes literature from history, since it creates a pervading sense in the reader that another version of events exists.

As I noted in the introduction, one of the main causes of this novelistic obsession with the historical past is the decline of Empire and the subsequent need for a redefinition of Britishness. It is no accident that Ishiguro sets the present of his novel in 1956, the year of the Suez Crisis and for many the last gasp of Britain's imperial and military power. Although the Crisis is never mentioned by name, its shadow looms over everything that transpires in the novel. The world that Ishiguro presents is one that must change. *The Remains of the Day* is a disquisition on the evolution of notions of national identity throughout a significant portion of the twentieth century. Its focus on the psychological tribulations of one individual is also an examination of Britain's changing place in the world. Stevens's eventual questioning of the narrative by which he has lived his life, based on traditional concepts of Britishness, reflects the country's own need to reassess itself – its cultural and national narratives – in

the face of these significant historical episodes. In becoming aware of its own tendency towards repression, the nation opens itself to positive change.

Jeanette Winterson also tackles the issue of Empire, but from a markedly different perspective. She strives to expose repressive mechanisms in the present by examining those of the past, and she seeks to reveal the hidden life – to exult in the richness of lives often unnoticed in the documentaries of the past and the ideologies of the present. In the title of her novel, *The Passion*, Winterson announces the anti-Enlightenment, anti-rationalist nature of her project. The novel is concerned with the spiritual and emotional. History is to be felt in the heart and not in the mind. Passion is privileged because of its anarchic qualities, its capacity to compel the individual to action by instilling an obliviousness to the limiting structures that might obstruct the way to the object of desire. Through this process, it opens avenues hitherto unknown to the subject. Once this step is taken there is no return to the previous state of insouciance. Passion opens the doors to self-knowledge.

Winterson's texts foreground the fictionality of history. By doing so, she suggests that if all history is fiction then other stories can be written about the past. In contrast to Byatt, who does not aggressively pursue the feminist implications of her text, Winterson focuses on the silencing of women's voices, and lives lived at the expense of those that should have been. Her preoccupations with lesbian desire, and its essentially hidden nature, imply that she sees history as only partially true.

The Passion raises the question about the right to tell a narrative and the power contained in such an act. Spivak asks whether the subaltern can speak and Winterson sets out to provide a reply. She proposes circumstances wherein the narrative of the dominant can be rewritten and reworked using the same terms. The narrative becomes a means of re-appropriating one's identity, of wresting control away from those who would impose their own narratives upon others. It is not surprising then that Winterson should choose Napoleon as the central historical figure in the first half of the novel, since he both symbolizes invasion – the imposition of one's will upon another – and the oppression of any narrative that might seek to oppose his own. And the oppression of Napoleon, the quintessential example of the modern invader, is absolute. In the aftermath of war, Henri encounters people "whose futures had been decided for them" and who "want the freedom to make their own mistakes." As the engine through which such acts are committed, Napoleon also personifies a blind, indifferent history that disregards and neglects those who suffer and die in its wake.

As the novel progresses, Napoleon's monologic and imperialist narrative is supplanted, first by Henri's more heartfelt and humanist version of events, and then by Villanelle's passion that recognizes the value of self-sacrifice. Henri's narrative provides a truer history in its recognition of the blight of war, and Villanelle offers a counterpoint to Napoleon's passion that decimates and does not nourish.

The telling of the narratives by inconsequential individuals, in the grand scheme of things, emphasizes the individual's need to exert some control over one's existence. The repeated phrase of *The Passion* – "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" – illuminates the tensions existing at the center of the novel. Winterson highlights the paradoxical qualities of fiction, in that it is possible to tell the truth with "lies." Her narrators plead for a different kind of reading, one that does not search incessantly for facts, but accepts that knowledge can be acquired in other than the traditionally accepted manner.

The novel begins by presenting alternating male (Henri) and female (Villanelle) narratives. Eventually, Villanelle co-opts Henri's story, relegating him to the subordinate role of mediator, and the lesbian relationship between Villanelle and the Queen of Spades is given prominence. This shift of narratorial control from Henri to Villanelle foregrounds some significant questions: In what manner does one narrative assert itself over another, and how is this assertion connected to passion, conviction, and a will to power? By placing the narratives, not in conflict but in competition, Winterson emphasizes the idea of coexisting voices, of those hidden voices that need to make themselves heard to provide us with a fuller sense of ourselves.

Winterson's fiction contests the authority of history, of patriarchy (even at its best intentioned), and of any discourse that seeks to dictate and limit the possibilities of our present. Narratorial power is stressed as the means by which one constructs one's identity and by which one resists any number of contending

external forces. Passion and obsession are depicted as the means by which one may override traditional structures. In Winterson's fiction, desire is often conceived as the impetus whereby individuals fly from the nets that bind them. Her characters search for something to which they can belong while avoiding imprisoning mythologies, the restrictive discourses of nation, community, religion and gender. This escape is most commonly effected through passion, a yearning that the individual beyond the confines of her self. At the same time, Winterson recognizes the involuntary, irrational, and often self-destructive aspects of passion. This idea serves to underline both the power and powerlessness contained within that very passion.

Winterson is conscious of the contradictions in her text, that a thin line may in fact separate Villanelle's passion from that of Napoleon. This is the source of anxiety and pain that lies at the center of the novel. For though she argues that we must be true to our passions, she also sees that we can become slaves to them because, ultimately, they can never be entirely satisfied. Nevertheless, by focusing on passion, and in this case *passions of the past*, Winterson highlights the role of fiction in transforming the abstractions of documentary history into lived realities.

Ishiguro and Winterson, along with the writers examined in this study, may be "anxious" and "desirous," but they are no more so than the rest of us. In fact, those very qualities allow us to connect with their texts. These writers, to use Greenblatt's phrase, reflect a certain strain in the circulation of social energy. The

postmodern period (post-1960) can best be characterized as essentially uncertain and unstable. Events of the twenty-first century indicate that this is not likely to change soon, and anxieties emanate in part from our inability but also our refusal to see how things will end. Malcolm Bradbury suggests that we are no longer in a post-war world, but in a "post-post-war world, which [is] . . . shapeless, unprophesied, profoundly insecure, and plainly a new challenge to all its writers" (399-400). The objective of these writers, then, is to give a form to that world and to create certainty where little exists. With the loss of religious metanarratives, as well as that of Enlightenment reason, we are forced to invest our energies in the *petits récits*. Once the past seemed to provide a narrative in which we could safely plot our lives, but recent events demonstrate that history is not linear, it possesses neither rhyme nor reason. As such, our ability to predict the future is severely compromised. Like Benjamin's angel of history, these novelists look back at the past and see it as a ceaseless piling up of one catastrophe after another. But it is the future that makes them truly anxious, for though we may be able to survive repeated disasters, there always remains the possibility that the next one will be our last.

Such a climate is likely to produce a number of anxious prophets. Oliver Bennett suggests that part of this generalized pessimism also emerges from our apparent unwillingness to learn from the past. Incidents of genocide and infringement of human rights continue unabated, despite the knowledge we now possess about such events taking place. This increased awareness, unwanted or

not, now makes us complicit with the barbarity we could once impose upon the Other. So the possibility now exists that we are once again descending into barbarism, only this time it is a barbarism with the potential to destroy the world. The Cold War may have ended, but the threat of nuclear holocaust persists because, once known, the knowledge of how to destroy ourselves cannot be un-learned. This atmosphere, Bennett points out, gives rise to a series of "narratives of decline" that are moral, political, environmental, and artistic. These narratives, in turn, contribute to a generalized "cultural pessimism" which Bennett defines as a feeling that "the culture of a nation, a civilisation or of humanity itself is in an irreversible process of decline" (1). The works of fiction mentioned in this chapter often endeavor to counteract these feelings of irreversibility, to propose alternate possibilities, often by invoking a re-reading of the past as the means to re-read the present.

The writer of contemporary fiction may be engulfed in this wave of pessimism; since he cannot imagine what is coming next, perhaps he has simply been conditioned to anticipate the worst. As Bradbury notes, "Perhaps the problem of the contemporary writer, and not just in Britain, is that we have reached the end of postmodern times and are entering an age that has no clear shape, no clear prospects, and no clear name" (458). At the same time, the writer of fiction, living in the interstices between reality and imagination, is in the best possible position to conjure up counternarratives to this dominant strain of negative certainty. The contemporary writer is also equipped to provide shape

and structure through narrative in order to make sense of the world for us. The past may seem to confirm our fears, but what if that past was not the *only* past? These writers use their imaginations to conjure up different pasts that project perhaps different futures, or at least ones that are not so uncertain. The subjectivity and provisionality of our understanding of the past can in fact be turned to our advantage. The past need not be the nightmare from which we need to awake, since we have the capacity to reimagine and retextualize it in a manner that creates hope rather than despair.

It is the very shapelessness of our age that these writers address when giving form to the chaos. By structuring narratives, we create purpose and meaning where none may appear to exist. Since we are fearful of what the future may hold, fearful of what our minds tell us the future *does* hold, we create plots that open up alternative possibilities, and these are grounded in whatever knowledge we can harvest from our past. Narrative allows us to connect a "fictive" past with an even greater "fictive" future, creating coherence and context where none truthfully exists. In this regard, Frank Kermode speaks of our *need* for "fictive concords with beginnings and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems" and that "the End [we] imagine will reflect [our] irreducibly intermediary preoccupations" (7). For we are ever-conscious of being in the middle of things and never being able to grasp the whole picture. We cannot know what our actions and thoughts will mean because we do not know the End, or know what meaning will be attributed to our thoughts and actions *by* the End. Narrative

fulfills the purpose of connecting us with anticipated ends; imagining potential conclusions allows us to cope with that which makes us anxious. As Kermode observes, "We project ourselves - a small, humble elect, perhaps - past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (8). In essence, with the end of history - the loss of importance the past seemingly holds for an ever-quickenning present - and our inability to see the future, we are robbed of context entirely. Narrative, however, gives us a context, locates us within a network of connections and provides meaning to our actions and desires. In fact, our narratives most frequently reveal our countless insecurities about what exactly our present means. As Steven Connor observes, "Nowhere is the quality of the present so apparent as in the intensity of the desire to make the present known and available to itself, in that quickening desire to grasp and outstrip the accelerating instant of our instantaneity" (*Impossibility* 22). These narratives are, first and foremost, quests for self-knowledge. A complete narrative allows us to analyze patterns in time, to plot how other stories may or may not have ended, to respond to our present as something not entirely new and to anticipate our future.

The novels examined in this study, each a product of this general malaise, respond in very different ways to the anxieties raised by our decontextualized present. Byatt, for example, perceives in the current rejection of nineteenth-century values a loss that cannot be recuperated and that we are much the lesser for it unless, of course, we can learn to *read* the signs. McEwan accepts that the

Holocaust was not an anomaly but merely an extreme instance of the evil that exists within all of us and that threatens to erupt again at any time. Rushdie is anxious about the path taken by India as an independent nation, but also the product of colonization, one that leans progressively towards fundamentalism and monolithic nationalism and away from democracy and diversity.

It is also evident that each novelist carries the conviction that possessing the past through narration allows us to exercise some control over the present and thus, possibly, the future. But each novelist holds this conviction to varying degrees. As I have shown, Byatt demonstrates, despite the postmodernist trappings of her text, a fairly unshakeable faith in our power to read the signs and know the past through imagination and a reconnection with those values we have shunned. Her ventriloquism implies that she can speak with and for the dead. McEwan is more ambivalent about fiction's capacity to impinge upon our past and thus our future. Any knowledge that we acquire through re-narrating the past cannot prevent the patterns of history from re-occurring since our capacity to change the future is limited. The black dogs *will* return, no matter how knowing we are. Instead, his text argues for an acceptance of what the past tells us, as well as an honest reevaluation that can prepare us for those eventualities that are the source of some of our present anxieties. Rushdie's ambivalence is even greater, however, for despite his avowals for the veracity of his narrative in contrast to the official story, such rereadings do not seem to alter significantly his pessimistic outlook on India's future. Rushdie narrates again

and again; in fact, his encyclopedic narration only reveals the degree to which he recognizes that his anxieties are well-founded. The optimism and hope expressed at the end of *Midnight's Children* has been achieved one hard-fought increment at a time, but it is a fleeting one. Rushdie suspects he is fighting a losing battle, for though he argues for the capacity of form to change content, the conclusion of *Midnight's Children* leaves little doubt that history vanquishes narration.

If we accept the therapeutic notion that narrative is a "gesture of healing," then we assume that the process of narration is indeed effective in making the narrator feel that he has gained control over that which makes him anxious. This is perhaps best ascertained by an assessment of each novelist's relationship with the present. The historicized fiction becomes a means of acquiring knowledge that will give us the ability to control the present. If we can figure out how the past turns into our present, then we may be able to predict how the present will become the future. But the authors of these texts exhibit different degrees of faith in narrative, and this is delineated most clearly in each text's attitude to the present. For instance, there is a feeling of resistance that emanates from Byatt's text, primarily in its privileging the past at the expense of the present. The present is a much poorer place than the past for having abandoned those values the text underlines as essential. Having traded passion and poetry for theoretical stances and paralytic self-consciousness, Byatt's modern scholars are pale replicas of their Victorian predecessors. The text finally implores a closer

reading of the past as a means of recognizing what we may have lost in the process of becoming postmodern. McEwan's *Black Dogs*, on the other hand, is more resigned to what the past can tell us about the present. The black dogs are both imminent and immanent; their return is a foregone conclusion. Reading the narratives of the past can provide us with the necessary tools for reading the present, for identifying the signs and attenuating whatever horrors the dogs bring with them. For while the text does not offer any practical or political solutions in terms of resisting the black dogs, it does propose that a self-critical awareness of their existence, within us and without us, is a vital first step. This awareness is connected to knowledge of how the past is reshaped by contemporary narratives. Jeremy's struggle with the present testimonies of Bernard and June can be correlated with his reactions to the monumentalizing aspects of Majdanek where the past has been most visibly framed. Rushdie's relationship with the present is even more ambivalent; his text searches for signs of a hopeful future and insists that it has found one. The novel's conclusion, however, with its typical Rushdiean implosion suggests that these hopes may be ill-founded, that Nehru's idea of an India of unity in diversity may have been entirely erased by a growth of fundamentalism and the political crimes of Indira Gandhi.

These contemporary novels also strive to represent a more "democratic" version of the past that both acknowledges the silenced voices and recognizes that the voice of the victor is rarely that of the majority. Each novelist allows the

various voices in the novel to coexist; they are neither synthesized or permitted to cancel each other out. And while each text advocates a certain moral standpoint, these assertions are attenuated by the existence of these conflicting voices, placing the reader in the position of deciding how exactly the past is to be read. Being cognizant of the contingent meanings any work of fiction can present, particularly about the textualized past, these writers accept that whatever knowledge, whatever truth with a lower case *t*, is extracted from the text is one that is dependent upon the complicity of the reader. It is not surprising, therefore, that the protagonists of these texts, most frequently the narrators, are themselves readers who arrive at incomplete and uncertain conclusions.

We are always dealing with the textualized trace. As such, one can negate any reading by noting that a text is not the thing of which it speaks. Another way of approaching this schematic is to question the trace's capacity to reflect accurately the event of which it speaks. In some cases, the truth of the event is simply eclipsed or erased by the trace that takes on a reality of its own. Byatt's Victorians may not really resemble our actual predecessors, but we nevertheless come to feel that they do. In other cases, though, we may feel that the text allows us to glimpse a reality existing outside its boundaries. In essence, we accept to exchange the possibility of direct truth for the relative truth-claims of the author. Rushdie's India is in many ways a fictional construct, but its juxtaposition with Mrs. Gandhi's construction opens up the possibility of looking for a third reading

of the nation and its historical past. Rushdie's text proposes rival knowledge-claims that are in accordance with certain facts and not yet falsified.

These novels, therefore, still advocate certain beliefs and values. It is clear, for instance, that Rushdie sees the Partition as a tragic misstep, as was the Emergency imposed on India by Indira Gandhi's government. McEwan's text strives to identify the dangers inherent in a return to right-wing and nationalist politics, and Byatt bemoans the loss of certain humanist values as well as human passions that characterized the nineteenth century. Such assertions should not be construed as weakness or blindness on the writer's part, but rather as attempts to confer some form of meaning on our existence. For while it is vital to maintain a constant state of revisioning and to keep things in flux, it is just as important to possess convictions and values that are based on a contingent interpretation of facts or events.

The issue is thus an epistemological one involving the type of knowledge that can be acquired from reading fiction. I have already pointed out Byatt's obvious sympathy for readers, but both McEwan's *Jeremy* and Rushdie's *Saleem* can be cast as readers as well, decipherers of the various narratives to form some kind of meaning by which one can live. The struggle to decipher and make sense of the knowledge we have at our disposal is, in some ways, a particularly postmodern one, as Peter Widdowson points out. We are so overlaid with particular obstacles to knowledge, the most salient of which is the overflow of information available to the individual making it increasingly difficult to figure out "*how to*

know." As Widdowson notes, "the more 'knowledge' we apparently receive, the more an eerie sense of *unknowing* comes upon us" (7). And the absence of any master narrative within which to slot and categorize this knowledge is a primary characteristic of the postmodern experience. Within this void, fictional texts provide blueprints for filtering and compartmentalizing information. They allow us to observe how narratives, and hence forms of knowledge, are formulated and structured. Fiction allows us not only to glimpse the *known* but also to consider the *not-known*. The novel becomes the means through which to ponder the to-be-known. The novelist, in creating his or her knowable community, allows the readers to think and feel beyond the borders of their own familiar world. A study of narratives and how they are constructed helps us to understand and thus influence, control, and perhaps finally alter the narratives that construct us.

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