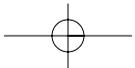
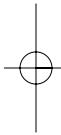
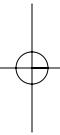
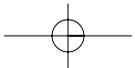
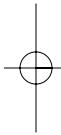
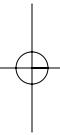




VICTORIAN CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS
Donald E. Hall, Series Editor





Lost Causes

Historical Consciousness in Victorian Literature

Jason B. Jones



The Ohio State University Press
Columbus

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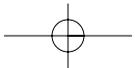
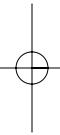
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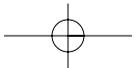
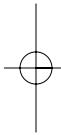
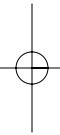
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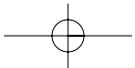
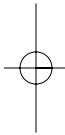
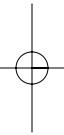


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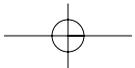
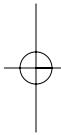
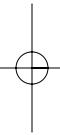


And over there my Paladins
Are talking of effect and cause,
With “learn to live by nature’s laws!”
And “strive for social happiness
And contact with your fellow-men
In Reason: nothing to excess!”
As one leaves off the next begins.
—T. S. Eliot, “Convictions (Curtain Raiser)” (1910)



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INTRODUCTION

Historicisms

Old, New, and Discontented

The history of the Victorian Age will never be written: we know too much about it. For ignorance is the first requisite of the historian—ignorance, which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits, with a placid perfection unattainable by the highest art.

—Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (1918)

Like most aphorisms worth remembering, Lytton Strachey's famous opening to *Eminent Victorians* is funny, economical, and, from the point of view of his target, achingly unfair. Its manifest content might be perfectly acceptable: Many Victorians shared Strachey's disdain for the standard life-and-letters biographical treatment, and for the tendency to flood the marketplace with bulky volumes of journals, letters, and reminiscences of even minor figures. What would have been truly painful, from a nineteenth-century perspective, is Strachey's apparently cavalier, though actually studied and, arguably, feigned, disdain for historical facts. In the nineteenth century's self-image, historical consciousness was a salient insight underpinning various forms of thought, including geology, biology, biblical criticism, philosophy, political economy, sociology, and the arts.¹ And a crucial part of historical consciousness involves recognizing the gaps in the historical record, coming to grips, in other words, with the difficult realization of how irretrievable the past really is. While this realization could tinge some Victorian historiography with melancholy, Strachey cheerfully implies that whatever we do not know, we are better off not knowing. The brilliance of this aphorism stems from his conflating of a minor joke about Victorian logorrhea with a repudiation of nineteenth-century historicism. By contrasting his own approach with "the direct method of a scrupulous narration" (1), Strachey wittily yokes two central historiographical concerns: What can historical narration hope to achieve, and is there conceptual value to elements that elude narration?

At the risk of overreading a minor joke, we can also see here how nar-

rowly Strachey confines his sense of “history”: History is an epistemology, a mode of knowing the past.² He strikes a faux-Arnoldian note in these lines, as he laments modernists’ inability to gain the distance necessary for a correct perspective on the past.³ The notoriously prolix Victorians thus frustrate our desire to understand them—though, of course, Strachey believes he knows them all too well. Many modern readers of Victorian fiction align themselves with Strachey: those novels that take on specific moments in history are, as my title suggests, “lost causes”—either lost because they fail adequately to replicate the events of the past they promise to construct, or lost because they fail to capture our imaginations about history or historical consciousness.

There is, however, another dimension to Victorian engagements with history: For many Victorians, and here I would include Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot among others, history has an ontological, as well as an epistemological, dimension. For these writers, there is an element of history that always exceeds our understanding. We can know many elements about the past, but there is always an irreconcilable dimension to it. This is not to be lamented; rather, it is the condition of our knowledge, our action, and our identity in the present. Because the past is partially lost, there can be a present; because we cannot know everything about it, we are driven to learn as much as we can about it. Not because our knowledge of the past would one day become complete, but rather because the past’s inaccessibility gives us room to speak. Perversely, then, the fact that the past is lost is not only why we have to write history, but it is also why we have a history at all.⁴ And that is precisely the “lost cause” that interests me here.

When we grasp the Victorians’ interest in history’s ontological dimensions, we recognize that they strive neither to represent the real transparently nor to argue for simple fables of progress. By contrast, the texts I interpret in the following chapters—including Carlyle’s *The French Revolution* (1837); Dickens’s *Barnaby Rudge* (1839–41) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859); Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849); and Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871–72)—indicate that such stories of progress cannot account fully for either Victorian England’s turbulent debates over political representation and industrialization, or the apparently widespread experience of alienation from history.

Rather than considering these texts as ahistorical or as uninterested in history, then, *Lost Causes* claims that they articulate, at the limits of historical narrative, surprising models of causation that, by emphasizing contingency and aesthetic or linguistic factors that resist meaning, arguably permit historical change. Written during a period that saw the ubiquitous, even virulent, spread of historical argumentation, the texts I examine try

to show how social and subjective realms connect, thus undermining two fantasies: that we are the authors of our own identities, and that we are the effect of historical forces. These apparently contradictory fantasies are actually complementary: They are two extreme responses to history, the first denying agency to historical forces, the second pretending that we have no responsibility for our actions.⁵ Rather than accept this false choice, the writers I examine suggest that history and subjective experience are incommensurate, and are only partially legible to each other.⁶ This does not imply that the Victorian novel focuses on private experience as a retreat from the social world; on the contrary, the texts I address show how historical explanations cannot fully account for even the coherence of a plot, much less such vexed problems as identity or the progress of society. And as we shall see, the claim that history and the subjective are only partially legible to each other has wider-ranging implications than one might expect.

To put this slightly differently, Victorian writers emphasize how neither individual will nor ideology can fully explain either the social world or private experience. If Victorian writers claimed only that historical forces cannot account for the richness of subjective experience, then we would be justified in calling them ahistorical.⁷ Instead, in these novels characters find themselves stymied by both the world and their own surprisingly “obstinate” desires.

I borrow “obstinate” from an Edwardian novel, Arnold Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1908), which recounts how Sophia Baines is often thwarted by what the narrator calls an “obstinate instinct” (439). Relatively unconstrained by social expectations, Sophia nevertheless frequently finds herself internally blocked from acting on her desires. At moments when its readers expected to find characters acting freely, *The Old Wives’ Tale* thus dramatizes an obstinate resistance to symbolization, to history, and to consciousness.⁸ *Lost Causes* argues that Victorian writers frequently appeal to this obstinacy when representing periods of tumultuous change; it manifests itself in their novels as an undermining of narrative cohesion.

Two implications of this position should already be clear: First, Victorian writers have much more interesting and nuanced approaches to historical knowledge than has usually been understood. And second, Victorian meditations on history are frequently more nuanced than the critical vocabularies currently deployed to interpret them.⁹ My claim that the incoherence and intractability of Victorian narratives about the past has conceptual value, and is not merely a political or aesthetic failure, qualifies recent discussions of the historical and social-problem novel genres, and indeed requires a brief assessment of claims made about Victorian realism. Debates about the nineteenth-century novel, whether in the period or

now, frequently turn out to hang on assumptions about causes and effects, and about our desire to arrange these in coherent, meaningful narratives.

The writers I examine share in common a mistrust of “the direct method of scrupulous narration,” if such a method purports to copy reality transparently. We should thus characterize differently their narratives, even the novelists’ interest in realism: These and other Victorian writers are keenly interested in the limits of historiographic models of narrative, especially when those models attempt to represent the identities of persons, institutions, or communities as potentially unified. Understood in this way, I propose, the inability of historical plots to cohere represents not an aesthetic failure, but an interest in the contradictory ways that the social and subjective realms intersect.¹⁰ Indeed, I argue that Victorian novelists sometimes engage historical plots not to show how society holds together, but rather to capture intractable dimensions about society. From this perspective, their often baffling representation of social conflict is strategic rather than ideological.

Attending to Victorian novelists’ skepticism about historical narrative, especially narratives of origin, means rethinking the conventional charge that the Victorian novel becomes increasingly ahistorical and politically quietist over the course of the century.¹¹ Victorian intellectuals were famously self-conscious, even anxious, about the rapid political, technological, and economic transformation of their society, and historians’ attempts to explain those transformations could offer perspectival solace for doubts about the pace of change. In the pages that follow, I want not to recapitulate the development of Victorian historicism,¹² but rather to unpack a specific mistrust of that historicism: Friedrich Nietzsche’s complaints about “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” Nietzsche’s formulation, I’ll soon show, helps us reframe both Victorian novels’ understanding of historical change and temporality as well as more contemporary debates between historicism and psychoanalysis; indeed, following this strand arguably permits us to see the deep fascination history has for psychoanalysis, and, in turn, the way a historically minded approach to psychoanalytic interpretation can help us read Victorian fiction more vividly.

Concerned on many levels about wedding science and history and its stakes for advancing the nineteenth century, Nietzsche suggested in 1874 that a scientific approach to history encourages us to view the world with false tolerance, and to disavow any responsibility for the present or future.¹³ For Nietzsche: “And what we see is certainly a star, a gleaming / and glorious star interposing itself, the constellation / has really been altered—*by science, by the demand / that history should be a science*” (77, emp. in original). Had almost any other nineteenth-century figure

invoked it, Nietzsche's star would celebrate the extensive relationship, newly theorized in that century, between life and history: Reason's light finally illuminates our identity as clearly as it does the surrounding world. A newly scientific approach to history discloses more and more truths about who we are and where we have come from—indeed, some nineteenth-century historians even claim to predict the future.

Here, Nietzsche advances two invaluable arguments about the relationship of history to life: First, a falsely scientific historicism masks our own egoism; second, authentic history is an after-the-fact response to an enigmatic, oracular past. This belated rewriting of a vatic past is, Nietzsche argues, a mode of fantasmatic hygiene: From time to time we need to destroy our fantasies about history in order to be able to act in the present.

The primary thrust of Nietzsche's argument is that historical consciousness is not always healthy. In his view, we are accustomed to believing that the study of history encourages a kind of modesty and justice. We recognize that great deeds have been done before, and they were accompanied by injustices. We also see that different cultures have varying solutions to similar problems, which encourages relativism. Nietzsche counters this by arguing that an untrammled historical consciousness confuses the distinction between external circumstances and internal desires: "the individual grows fainthearted and unsure and dares no longer believe in himself: he sinks into his own interior depths, which here means into the accumulated lumber of what he has learned but which has no outward effect, of instruction which does not become life" (84). Rather than focus on the standard Nietzschean argument in favor of action, I want to foreground the second half of this sentence, which claims that too much historical consciousness leads us to retreat into the solitude of our thoughts, rather than engaging the world. "Our thoughts," however, are just the detritus of historical awareness.¹⁴ Rather than extending our awareness, historical consciousness risks leaving us impotent and confused.

Two consequences arise from this confusion of inside and outside, both equally deplorable to Nietzsche. The first is that if we believe world-historical forces drive historical progress, then it does not matter if we act at all. Nietzsche claims that historical consciousness thus produces decadence. A converse consequence is disingenuous action. Even if we do manage to act, we can always disavow responsibility by claiming that we are simply carrying out history's mandate. Not only does history thus provide an alibi for our own egoism, but, as I have just shown, we cannot even know our egoism properly. Whether we act or not, then, our decision will always be undercut by our failure to see that even our private experience of subjectivity reflects an accretion of historical determinants.

Rejecting scientific history, Nietzsche instead endorses a critical history.

He claims that the task of historiography is to free us from attitudes that are no longer useful, thus opening up an opportunity to effect change. Critical history does not develop new knowledge, but rather rewrites our historical fantasies: “It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate:—always a dangerous attempt because it is so hard to know the limit to denial of the past and because second natures are usually weaker than first” (76). This crucial sentence resists the argument that historical narrative can fully account for causal relations; instead, it renders causation superfluous. After all, our own past is capable of producing us, and so we do not need a “better” one. Nietzsche offers the paradox of an effect trying to write its own cause, a paradox made possible by the distance between thought and its context.¹⁵ He also is careful to qualify the risk of turning critical history into a mode of voluntarism: it is difficult to know if we are rewriting enough, or too much, of the past, and it is hard to know whether or how the new history will work.

Because Nietzsche’s account focuses wholly on critical history’s ability to transform ideologies, he cannot eliminate the threat of voluntarism. He tries to mitigate this threat by emphasizing the vatic element of history. He argues that “[w]hen the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle: only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it” (94). The meaning of the past is never settled or finite. Although we inevitably interpret the past in light of our present concerns, that interpretation is no truer than previous interpretations, and will someday be superseded by the needs of another time. Critical history therefore can profitably destroy the fantasies that blind us, but it cannot replace them with more than newer fantasies.

Nietzsche’s argument usefully contests the view that history is a mode of knowledge, and suggests that historical fantasy is at least as important as fact. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1971), Michel Foucault extends this insight, arguing that the point of history is to dissolve our complacent sense of self-identity. Explaining that we tend to believe that the origin of an institution or person contains the truth of it, Foucault claims instead that stories of origins mask two kinds of multiplicity: they hide our own lack of cohesion in the present, and equally hide the origin’s lack of unity. Like Nietzsche, Foucault sees history as promoting a false continuity, and urges an alternative, genealogy:

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, hav-

Historicisms: Old, New, and Discontented

7

ing imposed a predetermined form to all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or, conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents. (146)

Foucault sees historical narratives as partaking in the genetic fallacy—the argument that a thing remains identical with its origin. In this respect he follows Nietzsche closely, since both see conventional historical narratives as disabling. Meaningful action is not separate in such narratives from what was already anticipated at some point in the past. Foucault instead argues that the contingency of events thwarts our narrative ambitions.¹⁶ Although we long to explain social transformations in causal terms, he contends that these are a species of accident.¹⁷

Because in Foucault's terms history moves by accident rather than causes, historical narratives are interpretations, not discoveries. As with Nietzsche, the task for genealogy is to free us from conceptual blinders:

If interpretation were the slow exposure of the meaning hidden in an origin, then only metaphysics could interpret the development of humanity. But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. (152)

Genealogy and critical history share the task of rewriting history in order to produce a new future; both therefore make history slightly redundant, since the future that will come into being has to exist in order for history to be rewritten. However, Foucault's account veers toward voluntarism insofar as genealogy's project is to "impose a direction, to bend it to a new will." He does not pretend that this imposition will be "final," or that individuals can achieve it, but does imply that history can be adapted to our demands. His own skepticism about teleology, inherited from Nietzsche, should remind us that interpretation rarely achieves what is wanted. All that it can reliably do, as Nietzsche explained, is derail previous interpreta-

tions. What is required, perversely, is a concept of interpretation without a specific aim, an interpretation that, contra to Foucault, does not seek to bend discourse to a new will. One of psychoanalysis's contributions will be this sense of purposiveless interpretation.

Nietzsche and Foucault share a conviction that narrative explanation misses crucial dimensions of historical change. By focusing instead on historical fantasy, they remind us of a peculiar belatedness about historical argument: It is a field of effects trying to invent its own causes, in the form of accounts that would then restore causal order.¹⁸ These accounts never work for long, Nietzsche affirms, since the real work of causation is a "dice-game of chance and the future," rather than a coherent story (70).¹⁹ In response to the contingency of time and events, we invent for ourselves histories that we take as our own. Nietzsche and Foucault's emphasis on belatedness and contingency is invaluable, yet they still conceive of causation as internal to discourse. In other words, although they minimize the determining force of history, they also tend to represent the causes of social transformation as emerging from discourse itself.²⁰

We see this tendency most dramatically in Foucault's two works that have most influenced Victorian studies: *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality*, volume I (1976). In these works we see Foucault's vision of a society linked by "an uninterrupted work of writing" (*Discipline* 197), a society in which the smallest details of everyday life attest eloquently to the machinations of power that have called them into being. There is a breathtaking smoothness about the workings of power in these texts, a remorseless effortlessness with which cause calls forth each effect. Institutions, persons, and events are all relentless textualized and, at the end of the day, tend to be legible to our interpretive eye. The appeal of such a perspective to literary critics is formidable. The novels, poems, and other texts with which we ply our trade are, at a stroke, converted into the bearers of disciplinary power. Rather than standing as sources of liberation (or even just escape), under critics' attentive gaze literary texts have been revealed to bear within them our own slavish subjectification. This revelation is more or less the explicit thesis of D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988), one of the most sophisticated engagements between Foucault and Victorian fiction. Miller argues that "From [a Foucauldian] perspective, the enterprise of the traditional novel would no longer (or not just) be the doomed attempt to produce a stable subject in a stable world, but would instead (or in addition) be the more successful task of forming—by means of that very 'failure'—a subject habituated to psychic displacements, evacuations, reinvestments" (xiii). The work of literature is to make the work of power easier. Literature is not the aesthetic sweetener that makes the bitter pill of power easier to tolerate; it is instead the sac-

charine pill itself, luring us into submission. And what Miller argues on behalf of *Discipline and Punish*, Nancy Armstrong's equally influential and valuable *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) argues on behalf of *The History of Sexuality*: Foucault "makes sex a function of sexuality and considers sexuality as a purely semiotic process. . . . Sexuality is, in other words, the cultural dimension of sex, which, to my way of thinking, includes as its most essential and powerful component the form of representation we take to be nature itself" (11). Armstrong, like Miller, argues powerfully for the idea that literature expresses the disciplinary aims of social power. Central to this idea is the premise that literature and disciplinary institutions are mutually readable, even fully transparent to each other and exchangeable for one another (sexuality is *purely* semiotic).

As we shall see momentarily, the idea that literature and its cultural and political contexts are mutually interpretable is also a key premise of new historicism, one that it admittedly inherits from Foucault. For example, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt dismiss as "perfidious" celebrants (the religious imagery is theirs) any who would assert a special place for literary art (11). However, it is worth asking whether this vision of Foucault is the whole Foucauldian story. After all, near the end of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), Foucault had already insisted that literature is "enclosed within a radical intransitivity" (300), and that literature and the concept of literary language emerge in the nineteenth century as a "compensation for the demotion of language, the most important and also the most unexpected" (299). This should immediately cast a wrench into the smooth operations of power: If literature is *intransitive*, then it cannot be the unequivocal bearer of power's imprint. And the unexpectedness of the literary confirms this doubt: There is, within the literary, something irreducible to the historical conditions that produce it. This irreducibility is *extradiscursive*, not non- or prediscursive. It is not a dimension prior to or untainted by discourse to which we could gain straightforward access; it is, rather, a property internal to language and representation that obstinately refuses meaning.²¹

When Foucault describes literary language as intransitive, he is making an argument about history, social change, and causation, not just art. One of the most trenchant critics of Foucault, Joan Copjec, argues that the problem with his mid-1970s formulations is "his reduction of society to . . . relations" of power and knowledge, with the concomitant "conception of a cause that is immanent within the field of its effects" (5, 6).²² It is this notion of immanent causality that American literary critics import from Foucault when they assert that, within a given culture, all texts, artifacts, events, and persons are, at least in principle, legible to each other. As an alternative, Copjec offers psychoanalysis's emphasis on language's failure,

which—as I shall argue more fully in a moment—recognizes that society’s “generative principle . . . cannot appear” among the effects and institutions we see within it. Psychoanalysis “*install[s]* society’s generative principle, provide[s] for it a place beyond the realm of positive appearances” (9). I agree strongly with Copjec that this is the crucial sociopolitical meaning of psychoanalysis’s account of causation, but it is worth acknowledging that it links up quite clearly with a dynamic internal to Foucault’s own thought.²³

As I have been suggesting, psychoanalysis contains a set of arguments about historical consciousness, temporality, and causation that are vital to understanding the vicissitudes of these concepts in the nineteenth century. And while the individual chapters of *Lost Causes* largely avoid the ritualistic invocation of Freud and Lacan, I want briefly to underline what I find to be most useful about their theory of subjectivity, and its unsettled relationship to narrative and historical consciousness. By way of transition to this theory, I want to risk a quick, and I hope not unfair, joke that telescopes the difference between a psychoanalytic and a new historicist version of interpretation.

In the process of offering a lively account of the founding of *Representations*, Greenblatt and Gallagher reflect on the theoretical debates that inspired it: “At this distance we remember best the heated discussions of Althusser and Lacan, but, for all of our passionate interest, terms like ‘Institutional State Apparatus’ or the ‘*objet a*’ have not found their way comfortably into our own teaching or vocabulary” (2). This has the ring of truth, because in the Lacanian parlance, the *objet a* names, and quite specifically, something absolutely disallowed within new historicist approaches: the *objet a* is, as I’ll soon show, the *lost* cause of desire; its existence disrupts the mutual intelligibility of text and context, and its baffling temporal logic contributes significantly to the intransitivity of literary language. By contrast, Gallagher and Greenblatt suggest that a sufficiently adroit interpretation could correct the “slippages” and “absences” of traditional historicism, thus unifying the historical field.²⁴

Psychoanalysis’s focus on the object of desire as necessarily lost preserves a gap between the real and its symbolic elaboration. The key to this discovery, I’ll be claiming, is the privileged, yet ambiguous, role of historical narratives within psychoanalytic clinical practice. In his seminar of 1966–67 on the logic of fantasy, Jacques Lacan reported to his audience that he had recently been asked what need, what exigency drove him to theorize the *objet a* as object/cause of desire. According to the transcripts of this unpublished seminar, Lacan also passed along his answer: It was about time. The *objet a* is the figure through which Lacan interprets the idea, which he discovered in Freud, of deferred action or belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*).²⁵

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And if “everyone knows” that Lacan emphasizes deferred action, nonetheless it is the case that the peculiar mode of causality it implies is still far from understood. Joël Dor has argued that the problem with so-called “wild” analysis—and, implicitly, the sociocultural or literary application of psychoanalysis—is its application of a positivistic causal model to psychoanalytic theory (*Clinical* 5–6). Dor denounces the mode of analysis that proceeds by linking a textual thematic to an image in psychoanalysis—hunting, as it were, for phallic symbols, or evidence of anality, or explicit models of oedipal crisis. Instead, Dor insists, we have to pay particular attention to the temporality of the clinic. When we recall how Lacanian concepts are deployed clinically, their obsessive interest in the narratives about the past leaps into focus.

For the seductiveness of the past constitutes the engine and the risk of analysis—a Janus-faced reality that emerges immediately whenever Freud writes on technique. Consider, for instance, this remarkable description of psychoanalytic progress from “The Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytic Therapy” (1910):

At its beginning psycho-analytic treatment was inexorable and exhausting. The patient had to say everything himself, and the physician’s activity consisted of urging him on incessantly. To-day things have a more friendly air. The treatment is made up of two parts—what the physician infers and tells the patient, and the patient’s working-over of what he has heard. (142)

Even granting the Rotary Club atmosphere of this particular essay, in which Freud tries to recruit more adherents to the psychoanalytic movement, there is something a little disquieting about a description in which the only person who speaks is the analyst! A more typical view—and one that is often quoted—is his claim from “Constructions in Analysis” (1937), where he claims that “What we are in search of is a picture of the patient’s forgotten years that shall be alike trustworthy and in all essential respects complete” (258). This view of analysis is a sort of trick. Certainly, there is an attempt to attain a complete version of the past, but not because it is valuable in itself. Narratives about the past turn out to be a sort of royal road to the unconscious, better even than dreams, because the constant disruptions of the “picture . . . in all essential respects complete” force the analysand into a dawning recognition that language speaks us.

This emphasis on the self-estrangement of historical narrative emerges early in Freud’s descriptions of technique. In a short, eponymous encyclopedia article, called “Freud’s Psycho-Analytic Procedure” (1904), he declares that, after explaining the analytic rule to his analysands, he imme-

diately asks for a “detailed account of their case history” (251). At first glance, this seems trivial and self-evident: Of course the doctor will want to know his patient’s history. But surely if the idea of *repression* means anything it means this: That analysands are constitutively incapable of delivering the goods when it comes to their own illness. It is not only that they will have forgotten or confused key details, but that the story that they want to tell is almost certainly not the story that they should be telling, at least not if they want to improve. (And, for that matter, there is no reason to trust that the analysand will want to improve—after all, the subject has a passion for ignorance,²⁶ and if improvement were simply a matter of wanting to, psychoanalysis would just be an especially trite form of self-help.) In other words, a founding axiom of Freudian technique is that anything the analysand says during this “detailed account” will be misleading.

Misleading, at least, at the level of *content*. Freud declares in this encyclopedia article that asking for a history of the case has a pragmatic benefit: The analysand’s historical narrative will produce a useful number of “associations,” which Freud defines as “the involuntary thoughts (most frequently regarded as disturbing elements and therefore ordinarily pushed aside) which so often break across the continuity of a consecutive narrative” (251). In other words, Freud asks for a narrative because he knows he will not get one. If analysands follow the analytic rule, then their narratives will always be interrupted. The claim here is not that the associations are the “true” history, or that they inadvertently provide relevant facts that the analysand has forgotten. Instead, Freud calls our attention to their meaningless disruptiveness. Put another way, it is the disruption that is the meaning, insofar as it signifies the existence of an Other speaker.

The first two seminars, and many of the early *écrits*, devote themselves to Lacan’s critique of aiming at improved memory or a clearer narrative of the past as analytic ends in themselves. He claims, in Seminar II, that “reminiscence properly speaking . . . is the passage into the imaginary” (320/*Le séminaire II* 369). The argument here is obviously not that the memories are false, though that may be the case. Instead, Lacan wants us to see that reminiscences buttress, or, at the bare minimum, refuse to challenge, our self-image. The specificity of psychoanalysis’s approach to memory emerges when we recall that even traumatic memories are imaginary in this way. For Lacan, the explicit content of analysands’ narratives just isn’t very interesting, because the narrative is almost by definition consistent with the ego’s self-presentation.

Psychoanalysis is therefore not a hermeneutics. It is not a question of uncovering hidden or secret meanings, but, rather, a question of making possible the discovery of *truth*. This discovery begins when the subject accepts that imaginary unity is not the whole, or even the most interesting, story:

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In the course of analysis, as I have pointed out to you, it is when the traumatic elements—grounded in an image which has never been integrated—draw near that holes, points of fracture appear in the unification, the synthesis, of the subject's history. I have pointed out how it is in starting from these holes that the subject can realign himself within the different symbolic determinations which make him a subject with a history. Well, in the same way, for every human being, everything personal which can happen to him is located in the relation to the law to which he is bound. His history is unified by the law, by his symbolic universe, which is not the same for everyone. (*Seminar I 197/Le séminaire I 222*)

This passage's otherwise exemplary clarity is blurred by the use of "subject" to refer both to the person in analysis and the virtual subject on whose behalf an analysis typically is directed. Lacan here foregrounds the distinction between the "unification, the synthesis of the subject's history"—that is, the imaginary narrative that the analysand wants to tell—and the "symbolic determinations" that give the subject a history. The trauma is "impossible" or unintegrated at the level of the *imaginary* (at the level of the ego), all the while registering itself in the subject's *symbolic* history.

Psychoanalysis emerges as a theory and a therapeutics that aims to account for the asymmetrical relationship between historical change and individuals' or families' ability to incorporate those changes. In this sense, psychoanalysis is a species of Victorian novel, which addresses itself repeatedly to the tenuousness of causality—not, as is frequently suggested, to shore up the fit between individuals and their sociopolitical interpellations, but precisely the reverse: To attune readers to the ideological nature of any such "fit." If what an analysand learns from an analysis is that the narrative of one's identity is never the whole story, nor even the story one would want to tell, then a Victorian novel helps show its readers that fictions of social progress are scarcely credible on their own terms, much less when compared against their own experience.

In this way, the novelists I take up here appear to offer a rejoinder to historians—as varied as Thomas Babington Macaulay, the most famous adherent of Whiggish historiography, and Henry Buckle, whose *History of Civilization* (1857–61) attempted to discover historical laws as invariant as those of the physical world—could agree that English history is the unwavering story of progress. And Herbert Spencer's sociological theory of historical evolution, especially in relatively early works like *Social Statics* (1851) and *The Developmental Hypothesis* (1852), proposed that even human misery should be tolerated as a sign of our future perfection.

This misery was often showcased in a genre I will refer to as "Victorian

novels of the recent past.” Addressing such a concept in *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (1956), Kathleen Tillotson argues that the 1840s saw the widespread use of a largely new technique: “the use of the past in novels of private life” (94). She claims that the novel of the recent past has two primary conceptual advantages over its antecedents, though these advantages tend to work at cross purposes. First, “the past, being past, can be possessed, hovered and brooded over, with the story-teller’s supposed omniscience” and, second, “the past, being not the present, is stable, untouchable by the winds and waves which rock the present” (94). Tillotson’s language initially suggests that these new novels imagine that the past is knowable: the past is “stable, untouchable,” it can be “possessed” and related by an omniscient narrator. However, phrases such as “hovered and brooded over,” or the “story-teller’s supposed omniscience,” suggest a more complex perspective is at work. As Tillotson acknowledges that the difference between “novels of the recent past” and “historical fiction” is fairly arbitrary, I will adapt it slightly. Throughout *Lost Causes*, I will use “novels of the recent past” to refer to novels set within a lifetime of the date of publication, which additionally deal with turbulent political events. These novels, I argue, dramatize how conventional historical explanations blind us to causal factors that do not mesh well with society. In other words, the novel emerges as a forum for critiquing our fantasies about historical meaning and their implication for social order.

Realism itself, as defined by practitioners such as George Eliot and Walter Scott, and theorists such as Harry Shaw, constitutes an attempt to represent historical processes. For instance, Eliot often asserts that only realism can show what is actually happening to the English countryside.²⁷ And in *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (1999), Harry Shaw explains that, contrary to widespread critical assumption, realism does not aim to represent reality transparently.²⁸ According to these thinkers, realism does not pretend to master history; instead, its narrative movement elicits reactions from readers that are analogous to their experience of historical change. What I want to underscore here is that nonmimetic elements are a crucial part of this process, even if no cognitive process is adequate to give them meaning.

As Nietzsche argued in the 1870s, realism replicates history in part through the formal incoherence of representation and plotting. But much earlier in the century, Walter Scott, too, draws attention to this point. In his famous 1815 review of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Scott wittily acknowledges that historical fidelity and plotting often seem at cross purposes. The early novelist was “expected to tread pretty much in the limits between the concentric circles of probability and possibility; and as he was not permitted to transgress the latter, his narrative, to make amends, almost always

went beyond the bounds of the former” (228). The improbability of this mode of novel—which Scott elsewhere calls the “Big Bow wow strain” of narration (*Journal* 114)—arises from the demand that all elements in the narration formally cohere. No matter how wild the protagonist’s adventures, they are expected to coalesce. Were the exact same events to happen in real life, Scott insists, they would “usually be found only connected with each other because they have happened to the same individual” (229). The formal demands of fiction impose a unity on history completely lacking in the real world.²⁹

Scott acknowledges that there is a new style of fiction that does not attempt to link up improbably diverse adventures; Austen exemplifies this style. Scott claims that, in this mode, precise description gives alternative satisfactions: the pleasure of “copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him” (230).³⁰ Although we might think that Austen’s mode of realism is closer to mimesis, since it does not depend on tenuous chains of causation, Scott argues elsewhere that the realism of minute particulars replaces temporal unity with a structural emphasis. He reminds us that “there is a distance as well as a foreground in narrative, as in natural perspective” (“Jonathan Swift” 155). The novelist is still not yet, at least in Scott’s mind, able to eschew formal unity in order to represent history accurately. Because, outside of literature, history has no such unity, a tension exists between the flow of history and the demands of narrative. According to the logic of Scott’s argument, accurately representing history deforms the narratives that purportedly explain it, because such a representation means disbanding aesthetic unity.

Realism paradoxically provides a framework with which to understand the tension between history and narrative. But if, as Scott claims, there is always a tension between history and narration, how can we interpret the popularity of the historical novel? As John Sutherland has wryly commented, the historical novel is the “most numerous and least honoured of Victorian fictional genres. . . . On no matter relating to the Victorian novel has posterity more diverged from contemporary nineteenth-century thought” (297–98). Virtually every major Victorian novelist experimented with the genre, and writers specializing in the genre, such as W. Harrison Ainsworth and especially Edward Bulwer Lytton, rivaled even Dickens in sales. The genre is difficult to define, thanks in part to its ambition: scrupulous attempts at historical reconstruction as well as formulaic plots of derring-do in period dress have an equal claim to the label. Nineteenth-century novels of the recent past, it appears, share with realism and historical novels an explicit concern with incorporating history into narrative.

Lukács's *The Historical Novel* (1937, trans. 1962) addresses directly the impasse of realism, whereby history necessarily deforms narrative. The historical novel, he argues, deduces "the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of the age" (19). By foregrounding the relationship between characters and their environment, the historical novel emphasizes the instability of the social world. Lukács claims that the point of literature is to awaken readers to the contingency of social institutions that otherwise seem permanent. The converse is true, too: Historical novels can insert apparently cataclysmic events, such as the French Revolution, into plots of progress and redemption.

Lukács's crucial claim is that the historical novel awakens its readers to movements of history. However, he is convinced of history's already established meaning, and so properly historical narratives always must mean the same thing or appear reactionary.³¹ Jim Reilly's *Shadowtime: History and Representation in Hardy, Conrad, and George Eliot* (1993) offers an important supplement to Lukács. Reilly argues that nineteenth-century intellectual discourse, replete with history, compensates for modernity's failure to provide a satisfactory experience of history. In other words, people write obsessively about what they cannot find in the world. The structural transformations of the Victorian period were impersonal, not heroic, and consequently provoked alienation, not historical or radical consciousness. As Reilly cogently observes, "the nineteenth century's proliferation of historical genres compensates for the inexplicable absence of 'epic' history with an interminably voluble historical discourse" (4–5). Reilly argues that, as the pace and scale of social change accelerated, and individuals no longer experience history as continuous, the question of "historical meaning" became a lasting concern. Reilly reverses longstanding critical assumptions about modernism's so-called break with history, literary and otherwise. What is most useful for my purposes here, however, is simply his insistence that the notion of historical consciousness as primally driven by loss—by the "inexplicable absence of 'epic' history"—is intimately bound up with the form of Victorian historical narrative.

These histories also focus on turbulent events, and so are sometimes incorporated into the social-problem genre. The social-problem novel, also known as the Condition-of-England novel or *roman à these*, most famously focuses on industrial unrest: Examples include Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), and Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845). Thanks to its focus on contemporary questions, the social-problem novel is often asserted to aim for transparency.³² However, like realist novels and historical novels, it too arguably focuses on social fantasy, rather than reality, since it struggles to represent political turbulence within a formally coherent narrative.³³

Lost Causes contends that, as with the historical novel, the social-problem novel sets for itself tasks that it cannot handle, not in order to consolidate class interests, but to suspend, question, or even abolish them.³⁴ The social-problem novel usefully indexes middle-class self-doubt and self-criticism, especially when it appears to endorse middle-class hegemony. It is as though the novels understand that self-help and moral suasion cannot ameliorate the social concerns represented within them. By visibly straining to render coherent social progress and narrative unity, social-problem novels often play up, rather than minimize, aspects of society that resist assimilation.

By drawing on the strategies of realism, historical fiction, and the social-problem novel, novels of the recent past underscore how difficult it is to rely on linear historical narrative. This book adds to the criticism on these novels by emphasizing extradiscursive factors that impede social or formal coherence; I argue, that is, that such novels pursue contradictory representations of society, not to shore it up, but to delimit the plausibility of reforming projects. Intensifying the fraught nature of historical representation, such novels turn out to be poetry's equal as a vehicle for exploring the gaps between our fantasies about historical causation and the experience of change over time.

I argue throughout *Lost Causes* that meaning fails in historical narratives, not because of ideology, but because of factors that elude discursive elaboration. For example, if history and realism cannot comfortably coexist,³⁵ then how are we to interpret an incoherent novel with an historical theme? Must we read such a novel as a "history," aspiring to unity, and respond to it by "countering" those aspirations? Instead, I demonstrate in each chapter that there are conceptual advantages to the incoherence of some Victorian historical fictions. Specifically, when we recognize that narratives—whether normal or "counter"—cannot make society coherent, then we grasp that the demand for coherence is fraudulent. This view, the various chapters demonstrate, is paradoxically alive to history and historical change—indeed, with apologies to Rushdie, this is one of the ways newness enters the world.

CHAPTER ONE

Chaos and Carlyle

I. Acorns and Facts

How often must we say, and yet not rightly lay to heart: The seed that is sown, it will spring! . . . The Beginning holds in it the End, and all that leads thereto; as the acorn does the oak and its fortunes.

—Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1837)

It is an idle question to ask whether [Carlyle's] books will be read a century hence: if they were all burnt as the grandest of Suttees on his funeral pile, it would only be like cutting down an oak after its acorns have sown a forest.

—George Eliot, "Thomas Carlyle" (1855)

These epigraphs, in their strikingly divergent uses of the identical simile, encapsulate a tension that animates Thomas Carlyle's best work: That between his conviction, on the one hand, that there is a clear lesson to be drawn from history; and his recognition, on the other hand, that our profound inability to accurately read history enables action and change. And so in *The French Revolution*, Carlyle wants to show how a set of sociopolitical conditions will promote revolution, and how revolutions always destroy more than the conditions producing them. Inevitably, for Carlyle, the acorn of the *ancien régime* produces the oak of the revolution; likewise the acorn of the revolution produces the oak of the reign of terror. By contrast, George Eliot wants to emphasize the fecundity of Carlyle's thought, even for readers who disagree with him. She stresses throughout the essay that Carlyle's writing is uniquely edifying, serving as a necessary precursor to new thought, even if that thought differs from his own. There is still a powerful inevitability about engaging with Carlyle's work, because, she declares, everyone who reads him is permanently altered, though not in a predictable way. It is as if the acorns of Carlyle's thought produce lots of different kinds of trees, not oaks alone.

Eliot's emphasis on the multitudinous fecundity of Carlyle's thought exposes a dynamic inherent in Carlyle's vision of history itself. In his essays, and in such longer works as *The French Revolution* and *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle urges us to understand history as bearing an incomplete, even enigmatic, meaning, one that the historian must interpret rather than simply recover. He does not lament the incompleteness of history, but argues that our thinking of history as partially lost enables historical awareness and even agency; the role of historical interpretation is thus to incite action, rather than only reflect it. We can recognize this emphasis most readily in Carlyle's understanding of the tenuous relationship between facts and meaning, and in his insistence—to the contrary of the historicist approaches now dominant in Victorian studies—that the past is not fully legible. Initially, this claim may seem surprising, since Carlyle famously preferred biography to historical fiction, on the principle that a single fact is worth more than reams of brilliant prose.¹ He renders this epistemological principle enigmatic, however, by consistently regarding metaphysical concepts such as Destiny or Fate as facts, too.² Carlyle's rhetorical elision of data and concepts—his equating facts with Facts—ensures that his writing oscillates between historical specificity, prophetic jeremiad, and philosophical speculation, sometimes within the same sentence. And if this rhetorical habit lends the credibility of common facts to metaphysical speculations, the converse is also true: Carlyle's writing tends to imbue everyday phenomena with a philosophical and rhetorical density that makes anything like transparency seem fantastical.

The density of Carlylean historiography renders the historical field vertiginous. In a first gesture, Carlyle's greatest histories always evoke the sense of possibility that defines a historical moment. For example, what makes *The French Revolution* an epic tragedy is how vividly the opening chapters capture the effete, claustal atmosphere of the *ancien régime*. By showing us why a revolution was necessary to relieve misery, Carlyle's history of France is always simultaneously a history of what might have been. Thanks to this emphasis on possibility, Carlyle is able to critique his own age as well: He does not simply show how Victorian England came into being, but also implicitly—and explicitly in *Past and Present* (1843)—asks how well his readers have honored that sense of possibility. In a second gesture, Carlyle reminds his readers of their own historical agency. By emphasizing the contingency and unrealized possibility informing the past, he underscores the possibility of changing the present. Rather than showing history as a process of determinate laws, Carlyle urges, even goads, his readership to take action. He, as it were, folds historiography into history: Just as in the past historical agents moved in a field of possibility, so too in the present do we have the opportunity to change the world we inhabit. There

is, in other words, for Carlyle a Janus-faced incompleteness to history: The present is the unfinished product of the past, and we continue to dream about making a new future.

The virtue of a “fact” for Carlyle is that it awakens us from our complacency about the world. Applied properly, a fact serves as a wrecking ball for received wisdom and cant. What is startling about this mode of historiography is its abstemiousness: Carlyle does not tell us what to do—indeed, given his skepticism about securing happiness, progress, and justice through politics, it is hard to see how he could. He simply frees us to act differently than we have been accustomed. I concede that Carlyle likely imagined that, when confronted with the Fact of destiny, everyone would act in the same way; nevertheless, he does not spell out a program for his readers. Indeed, this is a reason Eliot claims that he influenced every serious Victorian writer: “When he is saying the very opposite of what we think, he says it so finely, with so hearty conviction—he makes the object about which we differ stand out in such grand relief under the clear light of his strong and honest intellect” (214).³ Reading Carlyle can liberate us from our fantasies about the past; he clears the intellectual underbrush that chokes our ability to respond vitally to the demands of the day. As we saw with Nietzsche in the introduction, history’s ability to destroy received opinion is one of its most important contributions.

The predominant claim of this chapter, then, is that Carlyean historiography provokes, rather than simply reflects, historical action.⁴ He articulates this position against rival historians such as Thomas Babington Macaulay, whose Whiggish historiography Carlyle found disabling. If such a formulation did not seem tainted by postmodern controversies, one could say that for Carlyle historiography creates history. By this I mean something more than the modern commonplace that there is no history prior to the text: this position, attributed—fairly or not—to such diverse sources as deconstruction and new historicism, amounts to the claim that discourse constructs history. In modern usage, this seems to mean several different things—for example, there is no context prior to its discursive elaboration, or that agency, to whatever extent it exists, inheres in discourse rather than the subject. By contrast, Carlyle argues that readers’ encounter with historiography awakens them to a reality to which they would otherwise be blind. Consequently, historiography is necessarily “prophetic,” because history is still to come, prompted in part—although not in any sort of predictable, deterministic way—by the text, which itself is shaped by enigmatic shards that resist understanding. I shall dramatize these claims through three readings: first, of Carlyle’s essays from the 1830s, then of *The French Revolution*, and then, briefly, of *Past and Present*. Each reading pursues a distinctive attempt on Carlyle’s part to clarify the

stakes of a contingent historiography: in the early essays, it takes the form of a palimpsest; in *The French Revolution*, of metaphors of compression and explosion; and in *Past and Present*, of Carlyle's attempt to grapple with the revolutionary implications of his rhetoric. Such a rhetoric is dangerous in his argument, because justice and beneficence readily converts into injustice and mere chaos. To combat this tendency, he develops a highly metaphorical, prophetic style that underscores the need for action while emphasizing an irreducible gap between cause and effect.

II. Torn Letters

A fiction may give a more impressive effect to what is already known; but it can teach us nothing new. . . . Fiction . . . is essentially imitative. Its merit consists in its resemblance to a model with which we are already familiar, or to which at least we can instantly refer. Hence it is that the anecdotes which interest us most strongly in authentic narrative are offensive when introduced into novels; that what is called the romantic part of history is in fact the least romantic. It is delightful as history, because it contradicts our previous notions of human nature, and of the connections of causes and effects.

—Thomas Babington Macaulay, "History" (1828)

Macaulay's vindication of properly historical narrative against the inroads of historical fiction seems both paradoxical and slightly defensive. After all, what is most striking about his argument is that it implies a kind of readerly mistake: "what is called the romantic part of history is in fact the least romantic." He must hastily assure us that our pleasure in such anecdotes is of a different order than mere romance, because it teaches us something new about causal relations and human nature. But since we have mistaken "authentic narrative" for a mere "romantic part," how can we learn anything new (fiction being, as he has just told us, most profoundly imitative)? In effect, Macaulay inadvertently blurs the very distinction he is trying to establish.⁵ This blurring represents the crux of his conflict with Carlyle in the early 1830s: Whereas Macaulay sees narrative as an indispensable modality of history, Carlyle insists that narrative is necessarily inadequate to the task of representation. As an alternative to storytelling, Carlyle proposes that we consider historiography a mode of reading: History is variously a letter, a manuscript, and a palimpsest. Conceived thus, the fragmentary nature of the historical record is actually the good news: First, it turns the historian into a kind of hero, quasimiraculously

recreating historical meaning from the flux of events. Second, and more interesting, the incompleteness of history means that history is not simply deterministic.⁶

Two essays in particular, “On History” (1830) and “On History Again” (1832), advance Carlyle’s criticism of narrative historiography. The earlier essay features one of his most famous dismissals of historical narrative: “Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*” (89, emp. in original). Whereas for Macaulay, history is able to discover unexpected causal relations between events, and to arrange a narrative that represents those relations adequately, Carlyle understands history as a “Chaos of Being,” in which every event is an “atom . . . ‘chained’ and complected with all” (89). The metaphor of “complected” atoms uncannily anticipates the epistemological field of modern physics, especially of quantum mechanics, insofar as Carlyle’s image suggests that even the smallest discrete unit of matter, the atom, in fact bears traces of all other units of matter. It is as if in a molecule of water the hydrogen and oxygen atoms not only bond, but actually seep into one another. The enclosure of “chained” within quotation marks suggests the inadequacy of chains of causation for explaining the historical field. From Carlyle’s perspective, Macaulayan history is doomed as epistemology, because it focuses only on the chains, so ignoring the dynamic relations between events. Although “complected,” from “complexioned,” is obviously in the first instance a visual metaphor, it is also implicitly a readerly one, since Carlyle uses it to suggest that every discrete event carries the traces of all others. The task of the historian, in this view, is to reconstruct meaning from historical events, proceeding thus by interpreting the traces left by the Chaos of Being on each event. The proper mode of history can therefore at best be a kind of annotation, wherein the historian glosses each event’s connection to every other. Such glosses would of course always risk sliding into interpretive conjecture.

Were this the limit of Carlyle’s meaning, then he would be a new historicist, arguing that the traces of historical meaning are mutually intelligible. However, he soon makes clear that this is not the case; history is primarily unintelligible, and unreadable. Our attempts at interpretation are, in the first instance, only partial, and, in Carlyle’s fullest formulations, are less interpretation than divination of “prophetic,” even vatic, writing. Both “On History” and “On History Again” play up the idea of history’s text as a palimpsestic shard, though a shard without an original whole. “On History” emphasizes the palimpsest:

For though the whole meaning [of History] lies far beyond our ken;
yet in that complex Manuscript, covered over with formless
inextricably-entangled unknown characters,—nay, which is a

Palimpsest, and had once prophetic writing, still dimly legible there,—some letters, some words, may be deciphered; and if no complete Philosophy, here and there an intelligible precept, available in practice, be gathered: well understanding, in the mean while, that it is only a little portion we have deciphered; that much still remains to be interpreted; that History is a real Prophetic Manuscript, and can be fully interpreted by no man. (89–90, emp. in original)

At first, this remarkable sentence appears to undermine my focus on the potentially liberating capacity of Carlyle's imagining history as a mode of reading. By shifting the image from an unintelligible manuscript to a palimpsest, he seems to affirm that the aim of historiography is to recover the original message of history. Indeed, Hayden White's claim that Carlyle conceives of history as "palingenesis, the pious reconstruction of the past in its integrity" seems warranted (*Metahistory* 146). However, Carlyle actually makes palingenesis more obscure, rather than a desirable goal: By shifting the historian's aim away from translating the past, "On History" overall makes history a field for interpretation, not reconstruction. Because history must be interpreted, Carlyle suggests, it cannot fully determine society or identity.

If we think of history as a manuscript with "formless inextricably-entangled unknown characters," then the task for historians clearly is akin to translating the script of a long-dead language that few can still read. While such a task would be formidable, it is not impossible (as Jean-François Champollion's 1822 deciphering of the Rosetta stone suggests). And translation implies reconstruction: A translation aims to preserve as faithfully as possible the meaning of an original. Were this Carlyle's model, then he would indeed affirm palingenesis as the aim of historical work. However, the shift in his metaphor to history as palimpsest indicates that interpretation for him becomes more difficult, rather than less: Although "some letters, some words, may be deciphered," nonetheless it "can be fully interpreted by no man." The inability to fully interpret history is surprisingly enabling, because it allows for partial agency. Indeed, history only becomes a "real Prophetic Manuscript" with the recognition that it is palimpsestic, and the corollary that it can never be fully interpreted.

The interplay between palingenetic and interpretive models of history recurs to similar effect in "On History Again." In that essay, Carlyle asserts that history is "the Letter of Instructions, which the old generations write and posthumously transmit to the new; nay, it may be called, more generally still, the Message, verbal or written, which all mankind delivers to every man; it is the only *articulate* communication . . . which the Past can

have with the Present, the Distant with what is here” (167). As in “On History,” Carlyle at first appears to define historical work as reconstructing the past’s message. But it is easy to reconcile the idea of history as a letter from the past with the idea of history as a palimpsest: Each generation metaphorically overwrites the “letter” of previous generations. Simply reconstructing the “original” message of history could not be the goal of history, then, because each generation would have its own message. Viewed in this way, history would seem fragmentary and broken—much as Dorothea Casaubon experiences Rome in *Middlemarch* (1871–72). Although plausible, this reading of Carlyle is fundamentally mistaken: he does not conceive of history’s message as changing over time—at most, he would agree that each generation transmits the same message in different “clothes,” to borrow the language of *Sartor Resartus*.

As in “On History,” Carlyle overall stresses the virtue of oblivion. The letter from the past has been “falsified, blotted out, torn, lost and but a shred of it in existence; this too so difficult to read or spell” (168). Almost immediately he shifts from lamentation to critique, insisting that if “History is such a miserable defective ‘shred’ . . . the fault lies not in our historic organs, but wholly in our misuse of these” (171). Carlyle claims here that our idea that history is incomplete is wrong. A greater, fuller history does not exist; the fragments we inherit are the full legacy of the past. Understood this way, the aim of historiography is not to reconstruct the past—history is not paligenesis—but to unfold an interpretation of its meaning from the shards of available knowledge. Historical work would therefore have the status of a retroactive interpretation, rather than of reconstruction. The blotting and tearing of history’s letter releases us from the past, granting us the perspective we need to live, and binds us to it, ensuring that our perspective is not simply voluntaristic.

To put this another way, the cause of history—whether understood as the event which historiography tries to represent or as the meaning that would redeem and complete history’s progress—is *lost*. It will not be found in historical evidence, whether archival or archeological, and it will not be found in historical reasoning, no matter how rigorous and precise. Indeed it never existed at any moment in the past—how could it?—but is rather an illusion of the fragmentary historical record. The psychoanalytic reference that sheds most light here, then, is neither “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’” (1925), nor the famous letter to Fliess of 6 December 1896, in which Freud speculates that repression is a kind of mistranslation of the past (207–8). The reference instead has to be to the paradoxical status of objects of desire, wherein the plethora of objects given to be desired leads us to posit a primally lost, original object for which the current object is only a more or less adequate substitute. There is no original object; rather,

the notion or fantasy of an original object falls out of the structure of desire itself.⁷ Carlyle makes a similar argument here about history. It is because the “letter” of history is torn that it can be read at all, but at the same time its tattered condition limits us to—as T. S. Eliot puts it—“hints followed by guesses.”

Carlyle’s emphasis on obliteration highlights his interest in non-narrative modes of historiography, and differentiates him sharply from contemporaries such as Macaulay, the historian with whom he debated most vigorously in the 1830s.⁸ As the epigraph to this section suggests, Macaulay is best known for his interest in, and brilliance at constructing, historical narrative; his *History of England* (1849–61) is the most famous instance of the “Whiggish” tendency to represent history as the story of progress.⁹ When he is not defending historical narrative, Macaulay frequently uses painterly metaphors for historiography—landscape and portraiture figure prominently in “History.” And in these synchronic metaphors, his confidence that historiography represents the real shines through:

[W]e could mention portraits which are resemblances,—but not mere resemblances; faithful,—but much more than faithful; portraits which condense into one point of time, and exhibit, at a single glance, the whole history of turbid and eventful lives—in which the eye seems to scrutinize us, and the mouth to command us—in which the brow menaces, and the lip almost quivers with scorn—in which every wrinkle is a comment on some important transaction.
(277)

In historical portraiture, the part adequately stands in for the whole—or, in Macaulay’s own phrase, “produce[s] the effect of the whole” (278). Through the rhetorical force of synecdoche, historiography conjures the real. Although experience is “condense[d],” the historical portrait is nonetheless asymptotically able to express “the whole history.” The difference between Macaulay and Carlyle is thus important: For the former, our impression of the whole emerges from the intense power of the portrait; for Carlyle, by contrast, the effect derives solely from the viewer’s interpretive ingenuity.¹⁰ Macaulay would argue that the field of historical meaning coalesces in Carlyle’s “shred,” for in the language of synecdoche, a “shred” is merely a synonym for “part.” We would be closer to understanding their conflict if we identified Macaulay’s goal as palingenesis, since he is the one who aims to relate the fragments of history to a potentially complete field.

By contrast, Carlyle focuses on the importance of historical amnesia—he argues, indeed, that history is impossible without it. We can only recognize our difference from the past through forgetting: “Memory and

Oblivion, like Day and Night, and indeed like all other Contradictions in this strange dualistic Life of ours, are necessary for each other's existence: Oblivion is the dark page, whereon Memory writes her light-beam characters, and makes them legible; were it all light, nothing could be read there, any more than if it were all darkness" (173). This highly metaphoric writing recalls Carlyle's invocation of the palimpsest in "On History," but we can interpret this metaphoric tendency by arguing that history overwhelms us in the present, thwarting our ability to act. In other words, we have to forget to remember anything at all. The shred of the past alerts us to the fact that the best historiography provokes us to action, rather than exposing our impotence in the face of social transformation.

Thus by conceiving of history as partially lost, Carlyle transforms the commonplace lament that one cannot ever fully know the past, without implying thereby that the past and present are coextensive. Instead, for him a "shred" of the past remains lodged in the present, in unrecognized form. The task of the historian, he suggests, is to disclose the past's continuing relevance for the present, and when this is accomplished, we understand our present situation in a fresh light. Revealing the laws of history, in Carlyle's argument, frees us from orthodoxy, received wisdom, and cant; it does not, as is so commonly supposed, promote determinism or deference to tradition.

III. Compression

When Carlyle began to write historical narratives, he did not repudiate the antinarrative emphasis I have been interpreting. Instead, such works as *The French Revolution* stage a conflict between two different perspectives, one following conventional causal explanations, and another emphasizing chaotic, extrasymbolic factors that thwart such accounts. Carlyle associates the first perspective with metaphors of compression, and the second with those of explosion. Grasping his account of the interplay of these motifs highlights the contingency of history, and emphasizes that ideological or material accounts alone cannot fully explain the past. In this section, I focus on Carlyle's interest in compression; in the next, I interpret his fascination with effervescence.

Carlyle uses metaphors of compression in two related ways: first, to show how the present becomes the past; and second, to explain how revolutions happen. Because force holds society together, he argues, historians can explain social transformations by tracing the vicissitudes of power. And as the present becomes the past, its force must either dissipate or somehow be preserved. When Carlyle uses images of compression, then,

he invokes a version of the repressive hypothesis, which conceives of power as obeying the laws of a zero-sum game.¹¹ As I shall argue in the next section, the power of Carlylean history comes from his ability to represent events that resist assimilation to this hypothesis.

Carlyle's explanation of how the present becomes the past is a mode of conservation: Everything is preserved, albeit in strange, unrecognizable forms. For example, in *Historical Sketches* (1898), his alter-ego, Smelfungus uses the image of a peat bog to embody the compression of the past:¹²

All speech . . . is of vaporous character, and has to condense itself; speech and much else has to condense itself, in such confused manner as it can: these swampy Fen Countries are an emblem to thee of human History in general! The very meanings of speech, like the sound of it, do they not swiftly pass away? The hottest controversial jangling which drives all hearts to madness, this too is a transient vibration in the lower regions of the atmosphere; this, too, if thou wait a little, will condense itself and not be. (63)

Carlyle posits the movement of history as turning away from the turbulent present, where noise and chaos can drive one mad. If history is like a peat bog, then there may be room for quiet optimism: Although we find ourselves amidst desolation and decay, we can also extract useful fuel if we know where and how to dig. Yet a bog is also a dangerous place: swampy, full of explosive gases, and difficult to navigate. This passage exemplifies Carlyle's use of compression, because even aspects of contemporary discourse that seem to disappear actually persist. Although political speech "swiftly pass[es] away," it "condenses" itself into the bog—that is, it becomes a potentially explosive fuel. The heat of controversy cannot vanish, but must be absorbed into society.

In *Sartor Resartus* and *The French Revolution*, Carlyle adapts this image, using a rotting leaf as a metaphor for the web of force that holds society together. In *Sartor*, Teufelsdröckh declares that "nothing hitherto was ever stranded, cast aside; but all, were it only a withered leaf, works together with all. . . . The withered leaf is not dead and lost, there are Forces in and around it, though working in inverse order, else how could it *rot*?" (I:11:56, emp. in original). Like the peat bog, this is an image of a system that recuperates everything; it is also a vision of a system in which everything works—nothing lies outside the exchange of forces constituting the system. By conceptualizing history in this way, Carlyle binds himself to a cause-and-effect narrative. Let me show why by turning to a moment of self-quotation, when Carlyle quotes this exact passage from *Sartor* to telescope the "plot" of the French revolution.

In *The French Revolution*, he theorizes society as interwoven with forces that need to go somewhere:

How true, that there is nothing dead in this Universe; that what we call dead is only changed, its forces working in inverse order! “The leaf that lies rotting in moist winds,” says one, “has still force; else how could it *rot*?” Our whole Universe is but an infinite Complex of Forces; thousandfold, from Gravitation up to Thought and Will; man’s Freedom environed with Necessity of Nature: in all which nothing at any moment slumbers, but all is for ever awake and busy. The thing that lies isolated inactive thou shalt nowhere discover; seek everywhere, from the granite mountain, slow-mouldering since Creation, to the passing cloud-vapour, to the living man, to the spoken word of man. (II:III:1:407)

Carlyle here proposes a nearly thermodynamic approach to history: Force is always constant in a system, but it moves around to various locations and points within it. From this perspective, then, it is wrong to think of “France” as decaying or weak in the mid-eighteenth century. Instead, Carlyle proposes that the country’s force has shifted away from the aristocracy (which he identifies with order), and, needing somewhere to go, is absorbed into the Revolution. Thinking of “force” in this way explains Carlyle’s ambivalence toward the Revolution. Because it represents the exercise of force in an otherwise spent society, Carlyle applauds the revolutionaries for destroying the illusions of the aristocracy. However, the Revolution merely inverts the society it attacks, because its very force derives from social rot. As a result, from Carlyle’s perspective, revolution can dismantle society, but cannot build anything new in its place.

Both Carlyle’s preference for stasis over action and his accompanying skepticism about the ability of narratives to represent fully the meaning of events result from this thermodynamic approach to causality. Near the outset of *The French Revolution* he laments noteworthy acts as inherently disruptive: “Consider it well, the Event, the thing which can be spoken of and recorded, is it not, in all cases, some disruption, some solution of continuity? Were it even a glad Event, it involves change, involves loss (of active Force); and so far, either in the past or in the present, is an irregularity, a disease. Stillest perseverance were our blessedness; not dislocation and alteration—could they be avoided” (I:II:1:29). To the extent that an event changes our lives or identities, according to Carlyle, it also depletes the energy with which we had constructed those lives. And the effort to accommodate novelty can strain or dampen our excitement at the change an event promises. Because the amount of force is always constant, any shift in the distribution of forces makes society highly volatile.

The French Revolution thus stages a movement from the exhaustion of the aristocracy to the exhaustion of the Reign of Terror. According to Carlyle, in his clearest use of the repressive hypothesis, the aristocracy's weakness provokes the ferocity of Revolution. Revolutions, in this view, are always radically "excessive" or imbalanced and indeed arise from the inability of weak governments to contain society's energies:

[I]t is singular how long the rotten will hold together, provided you do not handle it roughly. For whole generations it continues standing, "with a ghastly affectation of life," after all life and truth has fled out of it. . . . Hast thou well considered all that Habit does in this life of ours; how all Knowledge and all Practice hang wondrous over infinite abysses of the Unknown, Impracticable; and our whole being is an infinite abyss, *overarched* by Habit, as by a thin Earth-rind, laboriously built up together? . . . let but, by ill chance, in such ever-enduring struggle,—your 'thin Earth-rind' be once *broken!* The fountains of the great deep boil forth; fire-fountains, enveloping, engulfing. (I:II:4:40, emp. in original)

Habit and routine canalize the force of society along familiar lines. The veneration of habit is always precarious, so when the existing order no longer meets a country's needs, the explosion will be all the more overwhelming. Strong—even tyrannical—governments, Carlyle suggests, do not provoke revolutions: We revolt only when a social order is so effete that it cannot even contain the limited upheavals that elude habit. This passage telescopes Carlyle's ambivalence about the Revolution, since he describes the end of the aristocracy as "rotten," "ghastly," devoid of "life and truth," yet laments the "ill chance" that it collapsed. And as is so frequently the case with Carlyle, he is not ambivalent about revolutions only! For if, on the one hand, "all Knowledge and all Practice" are the cherished, fragile product of an enormous labor, it nevertheless is the case that, on the other hand, "the Unknown, Impracticable" is a source of renewal (this abyss represents whatever is not caught up in "habit") as well as a constant threat. There is, after all, a kind of inconsistency in the metaphor: Carlyle aligns both "Knowledge" and the abyss with "the rotten" that gingerly remains upright. I stress this inconsistency not as a weakness, but rather as Carlyle's central insight about historical change.

We have seen, then, that Carlyle binds the events of the French Revolution to a narrative, one of the ebb and flow of power in a society. Were this the extent of his insight, *The French Revolution* would be just another cause-and-effect history, one that could be disputed, for instance, by representing the French and American Revolutions together as part of a happy shift toward democracy (as in Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* [1791], which famously

responds to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790]). Herman Merivale's largely critical review of Carlyle's history in the *Edinburgh Review* treats it in exactly this way, identifying *The French Revolution* as part of a new wave of writings that explore the earth-shattering forces at work in the Revolution. Yet Merivale makes an important concession by attributing Carlyle's genius to his suggestiveness: Carlyle "is always furnishing hints for thought; a slight sentence, a passing observation, often seem to open long vistas of reflection; but he rarely thinks out a subject for his reader: he never weighs, and reasons, and arrives at balanced conclusions" (80). Merivale implies that Carlyle's narrative, driven by his version of the repressive hypothesis, is less convincing than the diversions from that account. And in his celebrated review, John Stuart Mill claims that somehow, it does not matter whether one agrees or disagrees with Carlyle—and Mill does both in the course of the review. As we saw with Eliot, Mill shows that Carlyle's writing provokes original thought, even or especially when he does not compel assent. What is important is that *The French Revolution* produces the very essence of Revolution itself, as it was "in the *concrete*" (60, original emphasis). Carlyle's "creative imagination" is able to "summon up the Thing" "from a chaos of scattered hints and confused testimonies" (58). It is not a scrupulous or scientific history that Carlyle gives us, on this account, but rather a poetic one. Mill thus emphasizes Carlyle's ability to dramatize the contingency of events, rather than to integrate all such events into a coherent explanation.

To Mill and especially to Carlyle, the essence of the French Revolution is a particular kind of explosive chaos, which cannot be aligned with a particular narrative. Instead, revolution is an experience of perpetual turbulence, in which every action produces some dreadful reaction, although no one—especially not the historian—can predict what. Carlyle represents these moments with such ferocity that they threaten to swamp his narrative in *The French Revolution*. Metaphors of fluids and fires allow Carlyle to show us history at its most unpredictable and contingent, and in so doing to puncture our faith in conventional accounts of historical process.

IV. "Existence Effervescing and Efflorescing"

Cities, especially Cities in Revolution, are subject to these alternations; the secret courses of civic business and existence effervescing and efflorescing. . . . Of which Phenomenon, when secret existence becoming public effloresces on the street, the philosophical cause and effect is not so easy to find.

—Carlyle, *The French Revolution*

The frequency with which Carlyle resorts to such words as “effervescing,” “efflorescing,” and “eleutheromaniac” (Carlyle’s coinage to describe a frenzy for freedom) in *The French Revolution* might encourage us to see him as a chaos theorist *avant la lettre*.¹³ Like chaos theorists, Carlyle explores how extraordinarily complex and unpredictable structures can emerge from the repetition of simple rules—that is, how order can produce disorder. Thinking of Carlyle in this way is not simply an exercise in anachronism: It also allows us to glimpse his understanding of how rapidly events overrun us, and how even the best intentions, or the clearest actions, can sometimes backfire. From this perspective, Carlyle’s ambivalence about the Revolution is not a reactionary or phobic refusal of mass action, but instead reflects his acute sense of the justice of its claims.¹⁴ The Revolution escalates into mass terror, in his account, not despite its legitimacy, but possibly because of it.

Carlyle’s interest in chaos is partially evident in the relationship between minute particulars and noteworthy events. Critics such as Merivale decry this tendency as merely picturesque (84), but we can also see Carlyle’s fragmentary approach as underscoring what is most chaotic about all political demonstrations. For example, Carlyle notes that during the Siege of the Bastille, at “every street-barricade, there whirls simmering a minor whirlpool,—strengthening the barricade, since God knows what is coming; and all minor whirlpools play distractedly into that grand Fire-Mahlstrom which is lashing round the Bastille” (I:V:6:200). The elemental conjuring of fire and water lashing each other into an ever-greater frenzy is a standard combination in *The French Revolution*.¹⁵ What is notable about this instance is the way purposiveness transforms into chaos as the scale grows larger. Groups of people swarm at each barricade, making it stronger, but the cumulative effect of all of these groups is a terrifying loss of volition. Such a loss cannot be attributed to the bad faith of the participants, but is a simple consequence of numbers. This passage exemplifies how Carlyle tries to make the unpredictable (“simmering . . . whirlpool”) intelligible. Rather than try to give the history of the overall maelstrom of revolution, he addresses himself to the smaller eddies that contribute to it—what Katherine Hayles in a similar context calls the “recursive similarities between scale levels” (13). Not only is a single whirlpool turbulent, but multiple whirlpools intensify such turbulence beyond any predictive capacity.

The contrariness found within various experiences of fire—clean, smoky, chaotic, domesticated, force of nature, tool of man, and so forth—becomes a considerable historiographical resource in *The French Revolution*.¹⁶ At various moments in the narrative, fire is a metaphor for the explosiveness of the revolution, for the movement of history, and for

the limits of historiography. Carlyle's fiery imagery allows him to represent his ambivalence about the Revolution in sophisticated ways. For example, in Volume I, in which optimism still runs high (at least among the revolutionaries), the Revolution arrives as a shattering, purifying bolt: "How has the Heaven's *light*, oftentimes in this Earth, to clothe itself in thunder and electric murkiness; and descend as molten *lightning*, blasting, if purifying! Nay is it not rather the very murkiness and atmospheric suffocation, that *brings* the lightning and the light? (I:IV:4:156, emp. in original). Carlyle here ventriloquizes the revolutionaries' sense that the Revolution "blasts" France because the previous regime had forced its hand. Although the Revolution is terrifying, it nevertheless can abolish the corruption, exhaustion, and injustice of the preceding state of affairs. Additionally, in these sentences, Carlyle does not represent fire as chaotic, but rather as the purifying force which relieves the murky chaos of an exhausted social order.

In the second half of Carlyle's history, he repeats the analogy with an electric storm, which brings no longer purifying fire, but a terrifying, chaotic, unproductive cloud: "The chaotic thunder-cloud, with its pitchy black, and its tumult of dazzling jagged fire, in a world all electric: thou wilt not undertake to show how that comported itself,—what the secrets of its dark womb were; from what sources, with what specialties, the lightning it held did, in confused brightness of terror, strike forth, destructive and self-destructive, till it ended?" (III:V:1:376–77). Whereas the distinction between an oppressive atmosphere and lightning's clarifying force reflects the early promise of the Revolution, by this point Carlyle imagines the fire to be part of the chaos and oppression. What this transformation shows is the difficulty of containing even a purifying blaze. Even if the lightning bolt were capable of purification, the cloud is now "pitchy," tainting everything that passes through it. And though, in Volume I, the lightning came from heaven, in this second version its "dark womb" and "sources" are obscure. The point here is not that Carlyle is a hypocrite, or even that he changes his mind over the course of the text. Instead, Carlyle suggests, both instances are right: The Revolution is simultaneously a purifying blast and a nightmare, and it may even be a nightmare because it is purifying. Whether a fire purifies or destroys is, in other words, entirely contingent.

Carlyle's suggestive interlacing of contradictory imagery is an important technique, because it allows him to highlight the contingency of revolutionary experience. His representation of crowds is exemplary in this regard, both in relation to the argument of *The French Revolution* and for its influence on novelists such as Charles Dickens. Perhaps surprisingly, given Carlyle's conventional association with a heroic model of history,

part of *The French Revolution* aims to separate volition from historical events.¹⁷ Time and again, Carlyle describes persons and groups overtaken either by circumstance or by the eruption of chthonic desires over which they exercise little or no control. In particular, he shows how precarious is the dividing line between rational behavior and excessive violence, and even how rationality can produce violence. He comes close to defining the Revolution as just such an upheaval:

But Social Explosions have in them something dread, and as it were mad and magical; which indeed Life always secretly has: thus the dumb Earth (says Fable), if you pull her mandrake-roots, will give a daemonic mad-making *moan*. These Explosions and Revolts ripen, break forth like dumb dread Forces of Nature; and yet they are Men's forces; and yet *we* are part of them: the Daemonic that is in man's life has burst out on us, will sweep us too away!—One day here is like another, and yet it is not like but different. How much is growing, silently resistless, at all moments! Thoughts are growing, forms of Speech are growing, and Customs and even Costumes; still more visibly are actions and transactions growing, and that doomed Strife of France with herself and with the whole world. (II:V:9:58–59)

Carlyle's rhetoric is too frenzied to be described as equiposed, but it is balanced to the point of being self-canceling. The argument marshals very different kinds of energies to demonstrate the ease with which events can exceed our control. On the one hand, Carlyle always affirms "Life" against illusions (or what he calls "Shams") and consistently represents Life as contributing to order by resisting the chaotic source of being. On the other hand, this passage situates within authentic Life a shard of radical disorder, and he suggests that we may well yearn to give in to that disorder. The second half of the passage is particularly important, as it amplifies Carlyle's account of habit, making clear how it can be simultaneously a force for order and a prop for illusion. The continuity of habit means that we sometimes miss important changes as they occur, and can fail to understand how actions that once seemed reasonable become self-destructive. Under certain conditions, the inertia of habit can thus provoke, rather than allay, a demonic impulse lying at the core of society.

Many of the themes and arguments that I have been discussing coalesce in Carlyle's representation of the Paris mob: We learn here about the folly of continuing to support institutions after they have served their purpose; the unpredictable way that contradictory forces whip people into a frenzy, including the way that justice can quickly tip into injustice; and the diffi-

culty of giving a conventionally causal account of events. Carlyle is both repelled and fascinated by the mob's creativity:

[P]erhaps few terrestrial Appearances are better worth considering than mobs. Your mob is a genuine outburst of Nature; issuing from, or communicating with, the deepest deep of Nature. When so much goes grinning and grimacing as a lifeless Formality, and under the stiff buckram no heart can be felt beating, here once more, if nowhere else, is a Sincerity and Reality. Shudder at it; or even shriek over it, if thou must; nevertheless consider it. Such a Complex of human Forces and Individualities hurled forth, in their transcendental mood, to act and react, on circumstances and on one another; to work out what it is in them to work. The thing they will do is known to no man; least of all to themselves. (I:VII:4:261)

A mob is a threat because of—and not despite—its authentic relationship with nature. In a world marred by artifice and hypocrisy, a mob has the virtue of addressing important matters. As I have already shown, Carlyle sees every event as a threat, and a potential loss of force; we can therefore see why a mob would be terrifying. As though appropriating the energy of a population, a mob tears at the balance of social life. The paradox is that Carlyle sees this destruction as a necessary way to rid society of shams and illusions. As a result, no matter how much he admires the mob's "Sincerity," Carlyle also carefully shows how easily events surpass every-one's judgment and intention.

The key to Carlyle's representation of the mob—and also of the Revolution—is its "inflammablest immeasurable Fire-work" (I:VII:4:261). A mob is obviously a highly combustible mix of people. Carlyle's reticence about specifying the cause of fires—his recognition that they are "immeasurable"—highlights the importance of aspects of conflict that resist explanation. Raging infernos point up the limits, first demonstrated by Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* and his essays on history, of cause-and-effect narratives.

As further proof of this limitation, in Part III of *The French Revolution*, Carlyle explains, in a chapter usefully entitled "Cause and Effect," that some aspects of history are simply inexplicable in conventional terms. He then lays down a rhetorical challenge to historians. Imagine a ship, he says, loaded with ammunition, going up in flames:

So soon as History can philosophically delineate the conflagration of a kindled Fireship, she may try this other task. Here lay the bitumen-stratum, there the brimstone one; so ran the vein of gunpowder, of

nitre, terebinth and foul grease: this, were she inquisitive enough, History might partly know. But how they acted and reacted below decks, one fire-stratum playing into the other, by its nature and the art of man, now when all hands ran raging, and the flames lashed high over shrouds and topmast: this let not History attempt. (III:III:1:245)

Carlyle argues that although history can discover the sources of a fire, it cannot explain how those particular sources result in the conflagration that emerges. If the same strata and veins of fuel somehow burned several times, each iteration might easily be different. And although one can narrate or describe how such a ship burns, he implies that it is wrong to assume that this would ever fully explain how the fire came to be.

Carlyle adopts the Fire-Ship as a metaphor for the Revolution in general, but especially for *The French Revolution's* double-edged moral argument, whereby even admirable purposes can—and likely will—go amiss. The gathering of likeminded persons in large crowds is, in effect, like pouring accelerant on a flame:

But indeed that similitude of the Fireship; of our poor French brethren, so fiery themselves, working also in an *element* of fire, was not insignificant. Consider it well, there is a shade of the truth in it. For a man, once committed headlong to republican or any Transcendentalism, and fighting and fanaticizing amid a Nation of his like, becomes as it were enveloped in an ambient atmosphere of Transcendentalism and Delirium: his individual self is lost in something that is not himself, but foreign though inseparable from him. Strange to think of, the man's cloak still seems to hold the same man: and yet the man is not there, his volition is not there; nor the source of what he will do and devise; instead of the man and his volition there is a piece of Fanaticism and Fatalism incarnated in the shape of him. (III:III:2:246, emp. in original)

Sixty years before Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd* (1895), Carlyle offers an account of how groups can shatter constraints.¹⁸ In a crowd, the trait one has in common with the rest of the participants—in this case, republicanism—replaces one's will. In this sense, the decision to oppose the *ancien régime* was itself a risky endeavor, and became incendiary as more and more people made that decision. From Carlyle's point of view, while one might not know exactly what sets a political fire, the fact of its burning is undeniable.

Carlyle's interests in palimpsests and in fires find common ground here: Both interests engage our inability to explain events. His painful lesson,

expounded over and again, is that history is no guide for how to live, providing no plan for how to act correctly at any particular juncture. To invoke the language of *Past and Present*, history offers no Morrison's Pill that would resolve our current dilemmas. Instead, by making clear that conventional sequences of causation do not exhaust the development of society, history goads us out of complacency. He does not naively proclaim, however, the supremacy of human agency; after all, that causation is often ineffable suggests that we cannot rely on our best intentions. Because *The French Revolution* is set in the past, its narrative drive meshes well with this argument. By contrast, in *Past and Present*, Carlyle fervidly proclaims that England is hastening to perdition. How, then, can he sustain the same interest in contingency?

Past and Present is a curiously sibylline jeremiad: On the one hand, it aims to incite in its readers a revolutionary scorn for Mammonism, but, on the other hand, its vatic tone resists prescribing specific remedies. Indeed, he argues that rather than changing the world, we must change ourselves. The experience of reading *Past and Present* should transform us, leaving us less vulnerable to illusion, and capable of real action:

There will no "thing" be done that will cure you. There will a radical universal alteration of your regimen and way of life take place; there will a most agonizing divorce between you and your chimeras, luxuries and falsities, take place; a most toilsome, all but "impossible" return to Nature, and her veracities, and her integrities, take place: that so the inner fountains of life may again begin, like eternal Light-fountains, to irradiate and purify your bloated, swollen, foul existence, drawing nigh, as at present, to nameless death!
(28–29)

In this remarkable passage, Carlyle's syntax illustrates the gap between cause and effect that I evoked above. By interposing such a dramatic space between each clause's predicate and verb, Carlyle thwarts our expectation that he can guide us to the purification that he promises. By rendering agency enigmatic, these sentence's impersonal arrangement—"there will . . . take place"—underscores the "universal alteration" that he claims is possible. Consider, for example, the way the first sentence echoes the Lord's Prayer: Carlyle rewrites "Thy will be done" as "There will no 'thing' be done," removing thereby any sense of guidance, agency, or specific program. Adopting Carlyle's perspective should resemble an internal baptism, one paid for by sacrificing all of one's comforting illusions.

Though we must sacrifice all of our illusions, Carlyle refuses to promise any specific outcome; in this respect, his tone recalls that of *The French*

Revolution, where we saw forces that transformed society tilting quickly into ferocious violence. In his history of France, the mob represented an outburst of nature that exceeded judgment and prediction. *Past and Present* comparably invokes an “‘impossible’ return to Nature,” an outpouring of energy that cannot help but destroy the shams and illusions of the present—but because it means a “universal alteration,” we cannot be sure that the destruction will stop there. And the “Light-fountains” that will purify us echo the lightening bolt from *The French Revolution*, Volume I. Just as the originally purifying blast of the revolution quickly became defiled by pitch, the irradiating blast he describes here may destroy us along with our illusions. *Past and Present* thus presents us with a remarkably austere choice: Either the illusions of “Dilettantism and Mammon” (24), or the chance that destroying those illusions will produce something better.

Some readers found this open-endedness profoundly unsettling. William Henry Smith, for one, complained that “turn which way you will, to philosophy, to politics, to religion, you will find Mr. Carlyle objecting, denouncing, scoffing, rending all to pieces in his bold, reckless, ironical manner—but *teaching* nothing” (210, emp. in original). Smith argued that Carlyle forever preaches action, but never explains exactly what that action is supposed to be. Such a criticism misses entirely the thrust of Carlyle’s argument. Carlyle cannot know what the best action should be, because the entire sphere of actions, persons, and institutions must be transformed. From within the present system, he of course cannot explain what such a transformation would entail. What he can do is make clear the consequences of our participation in a system that, he argues, is antithetical to life.

As Carlyle’s historical writing focuses relentlessly on what eludes causal explanations, so it makes sense for his political claims, such as they are, to reject prescription. In *The French Revolution* and *Past and Present*, history always retains a sense of possibility; it is something to which we can aspire, rather than a force to which we must submit. Carlyle creates a wholly new kind of history, in which truth is located neither in the events themselves, nor in the genius of the historian, but in between: His historiography bypasses merely explaining society, and aims to transform it completely by provoking readerly self-transformation.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ghosts of Causality

Were Charles Dickens's posthumous reputation to hang on his historical perspicacity, he might, it has often seemed, readily be forgotten. Replete with anachronisms, Dickens's novels both evoke the past and interpret the present through refracted and elusive memories.¹ While Dickens is justly celebrated for his emotionally resonant depictions of London, for instance, he conjures them by fusing the half-remembered, half-fantasized London of his childhood with that (equally fantasized city) of his maturity. Because his novelistic procedure is so apparently indifferent to historical realism, critics often dismiss as merely imitative his two novels set during historical upheavals of the recent past, *Barnaby Rudge* (1839–41) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). The former, which takes up the Gordon Riots of 1780, has been read as a failed Scott novel, the latter as derivative of Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837). Rather than characterize Dickens's relationship with Carlyle's and Scott's works as failed imitations, I shall argue that *Tale* and *Rudge* emphasize an alternative causal model: both historical fictions override the general function of the historical novel, which is to show that "the present is a recognizable product of the past" (McGowan 33). Dickens therefore repudiates two equally untenable positions: on the one hand, the claim that the present is only a product of the past; on the other hand, the view that past and present are completely distinct. Instead, these novels suggest, the past is subject to revision by the present, with limitations. They also point up the insufficiency of ordinary accounts of causation, stressing instead factors that elude ideological or material determination, and indeed that remain stubbornly intransitive or meaningless. Dickens's putative inability satisfactorily to achieve historical immediacy—which has been treated as a problem of representation—instead portrays an asymmetrical relationship between history and individual experience.² At the crucial moments of *Rudge* and *Tale*, each novel abandons mimesis as a strategy, focusing instead on language that resists easy conversion into political or historical terms. In so doing, Dickens dis-

rupts attempts to mesh social and subjective realms, suggesting instead that these realms are at least partially incommensurate.

Rather than seeking to derive the present from the past, Dickens's historical novels ask what it means to be subject to history—that is, what are the qualities of a properly historical subject? The conceptual support for contemporary theory's widespread punning on "subject" emerges in these novels: by immersing his characters in history, subjecting them to the forces of historical change, Dickens paradoxically demonstrates the inability of history to guarantee meaning or identity. Instead, his fiction implies that although history produces subjectivity, it does not determine or construct it. Anticipating by sixty years the speculative arguments now associated with psychoanalysis, Dickens places doubt, guilt, and the unconscious at the heart of history. Positing the historical subject as a subject with an unconscious, *Rudge* and *Tale* foreground the origins of a responsible and sustainable relation to history in the haunted, guilty subject. To make this case, I will be articulating elements of *Rudge* and *Tale* that seem enigmatic or perverse. In particular, I will be suggesting that Madame Defarge's sociopathic certainty must be read against Barnaby Rudge's paradoxical moral innocence and social criminality. In these characters, Dickens undermines the credibility of both certainty about historical meaning and presentist ignorance of the past. The enigma of history, and the guilt this enigma elicits from the subject, emerges with particular force in *Rudge* through the paradoxical temporality of ghosts. Although we are accustomed to thinking of specters as ghosts *of* something, Dickens represents history as a generalized haunting. In so doing, he dramatizes the ways in which historical forces as well as individual volition fail—both in isolation and combination—as adequate explanations for historical change and subjective experience.³ He ought therefore to be seen an important precursor to psychoanalysis, especially insofar as psychoanalysis bears on questions of historical meaning; grasping the surprising connection between psychoanalysis's and Dickens's view of history should help us to clear both from the charge of ahistoricism. I begin by juxtaposing Dickens with Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to highlight the ways in which all three writers are more centrally concerned with history than is generally acknowledged. After briefly establishing the shared interests of Dickens and psychoanalysis, I turn to the novels—showing first the dialectic between certainty and ignorance represented by Madame Defarge and Barnaby. Having established how neither option is a credible possibility for Dickens, I then argue that he uses haunting as a metaphor for history. Finally, I show how contemporary theory has taken up this ghostly vision of history, suggesting that Dickens's ghostly model helps us understand theoretical arguments that otherwise seem perverse or needlessly abstract.

I. Dreams of History, Allegories of Meaning

Much of *Barnaby Rudge's* plot revolves around the Maypole Inn, an exemplar of the welcoming, entertaining public house so frequent in Dickens. In particular, the Maypole provides a refuge from home for Gabriel Varden, a locksmith for whom the novel was originally entitled. After enjoying the Maypole's delights one evening early in the novel, Varden rides, or rather sways, homeward, and Dickens's narrator comments:

A man may be very sober—or at least firmly set upon his legs on that neutral ground which lies between the confines of perfect sobriety and slight tipsiness—and yet feel a strong tendency to mingle up present circumstances with others which have no manner of connection with them; to confound all consideration of persons, things, times, and places; and to jumble his disjointed thoughts together in a kind of mental kaleidoscope, producing combinations as unexpected as they are transitory. (3:70)

The genially drunken Varden resembles nobody so much as Dickens himself, or at least Dickens's narrating persona. To the consternation of literal-minded readers, Dickens is not overly precise about chronological or historical distinctions, and as critics have long noticed, he generally proceeds by “mingl[ing] up present circumstances with others which have no manner of connection with them.” And Dickens's image of a “mental kaleidoscope” resonates well with his own improvisational genius for conjuring memorable characters, often in settings and plots drenched with the most varied affects. He implies, moreover, that these “unexpected” combinations of past and present disclose truths unavailable to conventional narratives.

If we read the tipsy Varden as a figure for Dickensian narration, though, we could also say that Varden possesses a kind of historical knowledge—albeit one in the mode of altered or diminished consciousness. It is a knowledge that requires for its articulation the force of Dickens's narratives. The interplay between historical enigma and narration is not my critical imposition, but is in fact elaborated in a letter from Dickens to Thomas Stone, a doctor who contributed several articles on dreams to *Household Words* in 1850–51. Dickens disputes as both untrue and unoriginal Stone's thesis that we dream primarily of present events and concerns. He claims that such a misunderstanding is the result of “the usual stories in the books” (Storey 6: 276), and tries to refute Stone's position empirically, by appealing to his own experience:

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My own dreams are usually of twenty years ago. I often blend my present position with them; but very confusedly; whereas my life of twenty years ago is very distinctly represented. I have been married fourteen years, and have nine children, but I do not remember that I ever, on any occasion, dreamed of myself as being invested with those responsibilities, or surrounded by those relations. (Storey 6:276)

It does not seem to strike Dickens as troubling or revealing that he never dreams of his family, though his laconic, impersonal references to his wife and children as “those responsibilities . . . those relations” may appear to us to be almost as telling as the claim not to dream of them. Like the drunken Varden, the dreaming Dickens “confound[s] all consideration of persons, things, times, and places.” Yet Dickens also places extraordinary confidence in the accuracy of his dreams of the past, and also stresses the importance of this accuracy. He does not, for instance, see dreams of the past as being updated to reflect present circumstances, but insists that such dreams faithfully and immediately conjure the past as it was, while dreams of the present are vague and nebulous at best. He does, however, grant that dreams of the past sometimes bear allegorically upon the present, so that the fact of his trying to work out a problem will be represented, rebus-like, in a dream. Dickens locates “the origin of all fable and Allegory—the very first conception of all such fictions” in this type of dream (Storey 6:277).

This letter raises an explicit parallel between dreaming and fiction, one focused on the enigmatic relationship between past and present. This parallel arguably warrants a connection between Dickens’s private account of his dreams and his narrative style, for, as I shall argue below, both this letter and his historical fictions aim to show how the past can influence the present, without reducing this relation to determinism.

Dickens does not seem to recognize that giving an allegorical dimension to oneiric representation blurs his careful distinction between past and present. If dreams are sometimes allegorical, then we cannot rely upon images of the past to refer exclusively to the past, since they might figuratively represent present concerns as well. A dream set in the past could, that is, entirely concern the present. Dickens also cannot maintain with any credibility that he has never dreamed of the present, or even that he has done so only by way of past images, since he acknowledges that his dreams sometimes contain symbolic elements. I am not trying to make a psychobiographical argument about Dickens’s self-contradiction: instead, I am reading the letter as a fascinating account of the supple relationship between past and present.

Recognizing that dreams are allegorical also means acknowledging a

need to interpret them.⁴ Faced with a confusing dream-element, we elaborate meanings for it, in order to dispel our bafflement. Dickens implies that the past—which is, he claims, the explicit content of his dreams—is enigmatic, in other words, and that we develop fables and allegories as a way of resolving that bafflement. But because those allegories are only interpretative, the meaning they offer is never quite secure. A second implication is that all fictions are historical fictions.⁵ My point is not simply the commonsensical interpretation that Dickens, like many writers, constantly reworks his memories of childhood people, places, and events in his fiction. Conversely, I have tried to show that Dickens invokes the idea of allegory to show how dreams could potentially connect to the present. Significantly, Dickens suggests that the connection between the past and the present is not “really there,” does not inhere in the symbolic image, but is rather part of the work of interpretation—the dreamer’s obsession with some problem. Dreams and fictions, according to Dickens’s letter, represent intractable dimensions about the relationship between the past and present. Such allegories, in other words, rework aspects of our past in order to dispel our confusion about the present-day world.⁶

Finally, it seems significant that Dickens constantly refers to bad dreams in his letter to Stone. All of his examples are unhappy ones, and he spends a full paragraph discussing his “unhealthy and morbid” year of dreaming about the dead Mary Hogarth, his wife’s sister, whom he loved intensely (Storey 6:277). Dickens does not seem to notice the contradiction between his earlier claims that he *never* dreams of his family and this admission that he dreamed of his wife’s sister for an entire year. Given the intensity of his grief, it is also contradictory to assert that if “dreams *can* be directly traced to any incidents of recent occurrence, it appears to me that the incidents are usually of the most insignificant character” (Storey 6:277; original emp.). His letter in its contradiction tacitly acknowledges that dreams may well refer to the present, but that they do so in complex and unsatisfactory ways. We can therefore understand the fervor of Dickens’s insistence that dreaming of the past is universal as defensive, even guilty, rather than as simply representing the truth about dreams.

Dreaming and drunkenness are arguably metaphors for Dickens’s treatment of the past, in which fleeting and surprising combinations have enormous power. Instead of seeing history as a logical narrative of causes and effects, Dickens offers an associative representation of history, in which his characters are driven to actions they often find inexplicable or unsupported by social or political identifications. In his historical fictions, material causes never seem to mesh with the stories we tell about our past—no matter how factually accurate those stories are.

One need not be psychoanalytically inclined—although it probably doesn't hurt—to connect Dickens's interest in history, guilt, and states of altered or diminished consciousness to the very similar interests of Sigmund Freud, and of psychoanalysis in general. As Freud elaborates his early theories both of fantasy and of infantile sexuality, he increasingly becomes interested in questions of history and meaning. How, he constantly asks, do people attach meanings to events, meanings which they defend exhaustively, even as those meanings cause them suffering?⁷ Just as in Dickens's letter to Dr. Stone, where allegory emerges as a defense against the enigma of history, Freud and Jacques Lacan argue that subjects are constantly offering up narratives of meaning to ward off those aspects of experience that seem bewildering.

Freud's paradoxical approach to historical meaning—and his connection to Dickens—can briefly be glimpsed in two comments on the etiology of hysteria. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Josef Breuer and Freud famously write that "*Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences*" (7, original emp.). Five years later, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900 [1899]), Freud modifies the aphorism: "Hysterical symptoms are not attached to actual memories, but to phantasies erected on the basis of memories" (529–30). As the later claim elaborates upon the first, the causal mechanism of hysteria becomes more, rather than less, enigmatic. In the wake of that enigma, psychoanalysis, properly conceived, comes into existence. In the original aphorism, the hysteric suffers from a repressed memory of a traumatic event; that is, an event that is somehow in itself traumatic, and which transfers its traumatic force to the psyche without distortion. In the second, fuller version, it is no longer clear whether the event is in itself traumatic, since Freud shifts the traumatic charge from the event to unconscious fantasy. Counterintuitively, it is as though neurotics—which, for Freud, means most of us—are inhabited by some agency that supplies the analysand with pain in excess of any external or material factors. That agency, identified neither with the ego nor the unconscious, is the psychoanalytic subject. Freud's account of hysteria echoes Dickens's theory of dreams, insofar as both the Dickensian dreamer and the hysteric produce fables to account for their experiences—and, Dickens and Freud equally make clear, this experience is often fraught with anxiety.

The point of an analysis is not, therefore, to recover forgotten or "repressed" *events* from an analysand's life. It is, rather, to understand the ways in which the analysand has attached meaning to those events. By dramatizing the contingency of those meanings, a successful psychoanalysis will allow the analysand to come "unstuck," as it were, from those unconscious meanings, and will therefore open the analysand simultaneously to the future and to a more capacious—or even just more literal—

understanding of the past. As Jacques Lacan puts this point in his first seminar, “the fact that the subject relives, comes to remember, in the intuitive sense of the word, the formative events of his existence, is not in itself so very important. What matters is what he reconstructs of it. . . . when all is said and done, it is less a matter of remembering than of rewriting history” (13–14). I shall argue momentarily that *Rudge* and *Tale* undertake a similar project of reopening the question of the past; in the meantime, a famous example from *Tale* may clarify what Dickens, Freud, and Lacan are after. Near the novel’s end, Madame Defarge causes the revolutionary tribunal to become aware of a testament condemning Charles Darnay. The testimony is particularly damning since it was penned by his father-in-law, Dr. Manette, during the latter’s long imprisonment. Dr. Manette is aghast, as he has come to love and admire Darnay; yet this shift in emotion is precisely what Madame Defarge denies. To borrow Lacan’s distinction, Madame Defarge insists on remembering history, and on disallowing its rewriting—that is, any change in its significance for the present.

One of the distinguishing features of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis is the refusal to admit that some meanings are better or more normal than others. For Lacan, subjectivity is an effect of speech and language—that is, of the inability of the signifier and the signified to cohere. The failure of words to refer adequately to their meanings leaves a space for the subject to come into being. Because arriving at a final meaning (on the evidence of words alone) is impossible, the subject has to commit itself to one meaning over others, and must suffer and enjoy the consequences of that commitment.⁸ Viewed from this perspective, the gaps in an analyst’s history have an importance as gaps—as the possibility of a space for a different understanding—rather than simply as holes that would ideally be filled up.

Dickens’s interest in the problematics of history and guilt are also refracted through a discussion of certainty and ignorance, and, like Freud and Lacan, his response is enigmatic in two senses—it is difficult to interpret and it offers enigma rather than resolution as history’s meaning. We see this emerge by placing Charles Dickens’s two most historical actors, Madame Defarge and Barnaby Rudge, against each other.

II. The Sociopath, the Idiot, and the Historical Subject

As to the condition of the peasant in France generally at that day, I take it that if anything be certain on earth it is certain that it was intolerable.

—Charles Dickens to Bulwer Lytton, 5 June 1860

Throughout *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, characters' certainty about the past's meaning reliably indexes their mistakenness, and even their evil. Madame Defarge, the figure of murderous memory from *Tale*, represents the potentially devastating consequences of such historical certainty when revolution extrapolates it into the public sphere. Dickens does not suggest repudiating the past, nor does he side with the *ancien régime*. Instead, he is anxious to show that the best way to grapple with the past is to defer as long as possible assumptions and inferences about the charge of historical duty. Keeping the question of history's meaning open in this way, Dickens suggests, singularly allows for the possibility of historical change.⁹ I begin with Madame Defarge because she exemplifies what is most paradoxical about Dickens's vision. Ordinarily, we understand "revolution" as historical change. This is especially so of the French Revolution, which seems to mark a turning point in the history of modernity. For Dickens, however, the revolutionary impulse fundamentally is not for change, or even for retribution; rather, I will argue, it is an epistemological vainglory, a claim that is directed toward knowing the past, and maintaining it as static, rather than reimagining the future. By contrast, as I shall show through a reading of Barnaby's encounter with his father, Dickens implies that recognizing the fragility and contingency of our legacy from the past allows for transformation to occur.

Madame Defarge "knows" exactly the meaning of past events (oppression on the part of the aristocracy; suffering on the part of the people), and what its implications are for the present (an imperative to kill the people's enemies). By undermining her certainty about this meaning, Dickens's narrator does not thereby imply that the aristocracy was benevolent: as the epigraph to this section suggests, Dickens acknowledged the oppressive-ness of the French aristocracy. Nevertheless, the force of Madame Defarge's imperative is terrifying. Her monstrous memory, symbolically knitted like Lachesis's tapestry, is unchanging and inflexible. As her husband observes, the mandate of history will "always be as plain to her as the sun. Confide in Madame Defarge. It would be easier for the weakest poltroon that lives, to erase himself from existence, than to erase one letter of his name or crimes from the knitted register of Madame Defarge" (II:15:179). Elliot Gilbert notes that Madame Defarge represents "capitulation" to history, choosing "the past over the present, the historical over the personal, the moribund written word over the living man" ("To Awake" 260, 261). She does not simply prefer the past, though; she elevates herself as the sole arbiter of its unchanging meaning, which authorizes, in her view, a massive, and partially indiscriminate, slaughter. Put as provocatively as possible, within *Tale* Madame Defarge, rather than Dickens's narrator, strives to make the present a recognizable product of the past. Refusing to conceive

of her revolutionary activity as a form of rupture, Madame Defarge clings passionately to her hatreds so as to keep them, and thus her grief for her lost sister, alive but also unchanging.

Whereas Madame Defarge stands for certainty about historical meaning, *A Tale of Two Cities* endorses, by contrast, epistemological modesty as promoting a more sustainable relationship to history. As Jerry Cruncher rides back to London after exchanging messages with Jarvis Lorry, the narrator comments:

A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this. . . . My friend is dead, my neighbour is dead, my love, the darling of my soul, is dead; it is the inexorable consolidation and perpetuation of the secret that was always in that individuality, and which I shall carry in mine to my life's end. (3:14–15)

The paean to fact in the opening phrase evidently refers to Carlyle, recalling a well-known discussion of secrets in *Sartor Resartus* (1831–32): Carlyle writes that the “secret of Man’s being is still like the Sphinx’s secret: a riddle that he cannot rede, and for ignorance of which he suffers death, the worst death, a spiritual” (I:8:43; see Timko 186–87). To recognize the resemblance of these passages, however, is to bring into view their difference: Carlyle’s “secret” is mystical or metaphysical (everything betrays the same secret), whereas in Dickens the secret is structural. Not only does every individual have a secret, but *Tale’s* narrator more strongly suggests that individuals simply are that secret, and moreover, it is on the basis of that constitutive secrecy that relationships are possible. In this passage, death underscores the fact that we cannot know each other. Carlyle laments the secret, because ignorance of its truth causes death, implying that the secret can—and indeed, must—be discovered. Dickens by contrast does not imagine that the secrets in every heart can be fully disclosed. For him, individuals are not transparent to each other.¹⁰

Madame Defarge cannot tolerate such an emphasis on occlusion, and the narrator consistently figures her refusal of doubt in apocalyptic terms.¹¹ In a chapter entitled “Still Knitting,” the narrator presents an initially telescopic vision, encompassing all of France, only to zoom in on the Defarges:

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Château and hut, stone face and dangling figure, the red stain on the stone floor, and the pure water in the village well—thousands of acres of land—a whole province of France—all France itself—lay under the night sky, concentrated into a faint hairbreadth line. So does a whole world, with all its greatneses and littlenesses, lie in a twinkling star. And as mere human knowledge can split a ray of light and analyse the manner of its composition, so, sublimer intelligences may read in the feeble shining of this earth of ours, every thought and act, every vice and virtue, of every responsible creature in it.

The Defarges, husband and wife, came lumbering under the starlight. . . . (II:16:183)

The opening sentence of this passage underscores Dickens's Carlylean understanding of the French Revolution. The narrator contrasts the château of the Marquis Evrémonde, murdered because he carelessly ran over a peasant's son, with the huts of the villagers in his town; the gothic faces of the château, which took on the Marquis's appearance after his death, with his murderer, now hanging from a gallows above the town well; the stain of the Marquis's blood upon the floor, with the water now being poisoned by the hung man's body. The juxtaposition of the Defarges with the narrator's spectroscopic metaphor at the end of the passage establishes an ironic relationship between the "sublimer intelligences" and the "lumbering" revolutionary couple. Especially Madame Defarge believes that one can adjudicate the vice and "responsibility" of every human in France. As Catherine Gallagher notes, the Revolution mandates transparency while necessitating a practice of secrecy: the "belief in secrets creates the need to expose, but the need to expose is reciprocally dependent on the invention of secret plots. The French Revolution was uncannily like a Dickens novel in this regard: the invented hidden plot justifies the will to omniscience" ("A Duplicity" 134). Here, Gallagher conceives of the secret as having a specific content, which in principle we could discover, or the narrator could disclose. Dickens, by contrast, introduces the concept of a structural ignorance that is the condition of novelistic knowledge. The contrast between "sublimer" and human intelligences already suggests that Dickens's novel will not satisfy anything like a "will to omniscience"; likewise, his narrator has already made clear that humanity is constituted through secrecy. In other words, Dickens represents a hole in meaning that compels us to distinguish between what can be known and what cannot be. In distinguishing thus between knowledge and omniscience, I am appropriating one of Joan Copjec's characterizations of psychoanalysis. For Dickens, as with psychoanalysis, the argument is "not that we can ulti-

mately penetrate what had previously seemed the unfathomable secret of the subject but that there is nothing to fathom; the subject has no secret knowledge; or, to quote the famous Hegelian quip: the Egyptian secrets were also secret from the Egyptians themselves" (Copjec 66). Madame Defarge, representative of the will to omniscience, believes that the Egyptians knew their secrets; Dickens represents this will toward omniscience as monstrous, and, in the last analysis, false in its relationship to the past both because it overstates its own certainty and because it disallows in advance the possibility of change—in other words, it denies that the past is "past" at all.

The narrator emphasizes the limits of certainty in his representation of Madame Defarge's death. Despite all her certainty, Madame Defarge dies in a most contingent, even slapstick, way. Hunting for Lucie Darnay, Madame Defarge discovers instead Miss Pross, Lucie's maid. Neither woman speaks the other's language, so they exchange mutually unintelligible insults and threats for several moments before hurling themselves at each other in what is quite literally a fight for Lucie's fate. In their fight, Madame Defarge tries to shoot Miss Pross, but accidentally shoots herself (in part because Pross is slapping at the gun). Edward Bulwer Lytton protested that this end is too accidental for the novel's chief villain; yet Dickens insists, by way of reply, that only such an ending is adequate to Madame Defarge's crimes:

Where the accident is inseparable from the passion and emotion of the characters, where it is strictly consistent with the whole design, and arises out of some culminating proceeding on the part of the character which the whole story has led up to, it seems to me to become, as it were, an act of divine justice. And when I use Miss Pross . . . to bring about that catastrophe, I have the positive intention of making that half-comic intervention a part of the desperate woman's failure, and of opposing that mean death—instead of a desperate one in the streets, which she wouldn't have minded—to the dignity of Carton's. (Paroissien *Selected* 340–41)

The farce surrounding Madame Defarge's death arguably stands as a refutation of her certainty during life. Dickens suggests that her obsession with the meaning of the historical past blinds her to the consequences of her own actions, and prevents her even from overcoming the comical Miss Pross. He also explains that what seems accidental is in fact not so: Madame Defarge's blind pursuit of her passion causes her death. He therefore cannot be accused of eclipsing history altogether; instead, this letter suggests that ideological explanations cannot wholly account for our

actions. The realm of the accidental reminds us that the social realm will not serve as a guarantee of literary meaning.

Barnaby Rudge contains a satiric precedent to Madame Defarge's certainty in *A Tale of Two Cities*, indicating Dickens's central fascination with the interplay of certainty and doubt. The focus on *Rudge's* political half is the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots, named after Lord George Gordon and his Protestant Association. Introducing Lord Gordon, his (fictional) secretary Gashford, and their Protestant Association, Dickens offers this scathing praise for their organizational efforts:

To surround anything, however monstrous or ridiculous, with an air of mystery, is to invest it with a secret charm, and power of attraction which to the crowd is irresistible. False priests, false prophets, false doctors, false patriots, false prodigies of every kind, veiling their proceedings in mystery, have always addressed themselves at an immense advantage to the popular credulity, and have been, perhaps, more indebted to that resource in gaining and keeping for a time the upper hand of Truth and Common Sense, than to any half-dozen items in the whole catalogue of imposture. Curiosity is, and has been from the creation of the world, a master-passion. To awaken it, to gratify it by slight degrees, and yet leave something always in suspense, is to establish the surest hold that can be had, in wrong, on the unthinking portion of mankind. (37:347)

This passage appears to substantiate Gallagher's reading of *Tale*, as Dickens castigates others for creating mystery even as he himself does so. McGowan, too, observes that "this reproof of Gashford reads like an explanation of Dickens's own extraordinary success" (43).

This passage, however, is directed against mystification, rather than the structural kinds of secrecy I discussed earlier. Dickens complains in this passage about mountebanks who "veil their proceedings in mystery," wrapping a layer of obfuscation around everyday items, all the better to make their fraudulent promises enticing. He scorns, in other words, those who offer up, as reparation for the frustrations of everyday life, banal objects surfeited with mystery, and who represent themselves as possessing the key to that mystery. The fictional Protestant Association is a perfect example, because it offers scapegoating and hatred as answers for social change and the inequities of life. Dickens reverses this procedure: His historical novels emphasize elements of historical and generational transmission that are structurally unknowable, even—or especially—at those moments when transmission seems the most reliable. He thus reminds us of the ambiguity and conflicting interpretations at the core of what we take to be certain;

crucially, he does not hold out any promise of resolving the enigma of existence. To put this point in Freudian terms, Dickens does not believe that there is a cure for subjectivity.

If Madame Defarge represents murderous historical certainty, Barnaby Rudge initially embodies the reverse. *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of '80* is by far Dickens's least-read novel, and so it may be worth sketching its background and plot. After his early popular successes, Dickens wanted to write a historical novel, and the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots of 1780 appealed to him as subject matter for several related reasons. First, these riots were the clearest local reminder of the threat posed by the mob, which had been seared into English middle-class consciousness by the French Revolution. Second, Carlyle's description of the revolutionary crowd in *The French Revolution* (1837) fired Dickens's imagination. Third, anti-Catholic prejudice lingered well into the nineteenth century, receiving a spur in 1829 with the passage of Catholic Emancipation.¹² For instance, an unsigned 1836 essay entitled "The 'No-Popery' Cry," in *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, characterized Catholicism as a "fearful evil," and recalled Horace Walpole's admonition that "When the people of England lose the cry against Popery, they will lose their constitution and their liberty" (511). Moreover, the creation in 1839 of a new Protestant Association modeled on Gordon's lent topical relevance to the 1780 riots.¹³

A central interpretive problem in relation to *Rudge* has been how to hold the novel's two halves together. Despite Dickens's interest in the Gordon Riots, the novel is named after the idiot son of a murderer, who has been raised by his mother to be ignorant of his father's crime. The novel's first half, which details Barnaby's upbringing with his mother, explores the world and denizens of the Maypole Inn, and depicts both Inn and family as haunted by Barnaby's father, seems to have little to do with the second half, with its more explicitly historical account of London during the Gordon Riots. Barnaby has an acute imagination and a strong aversion to blood, but is utterly without reason or memory. As a result, he becomes swept up in the novel's historical events, and leads the mob's violent anti-Catholic protests in 1780. He is arrested, and while in prison, by a startling coincidence meets his father.

Barnaby's chance encounter with his father while they both await execution crystallizes the interplay between certainty and ignorance that I have been tracing. Here's how Dickens presents it:

Heaven alone can tell, with what vague thoughts of duty, and affection; with what strange promptings of nature, intelligible to him as to a man of radiant mind and most enlarged capacity; with what

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dim memories of children he had played with when a child himself, who had prattled of their fathers, and of loving them, and being loved; with how many half-remembered, dreamy associations of his mother's grief and tears and widowhood; he watched and tended this man. But that a vague and shadowy crowd of such ideas came slowly on him; that they taught him to be sorry when he looked upon his haggard face, that they overflowed his eyes when he stooped to kiss him on the cheek, that they kept him waking in a tearful gladness, shading him from the sun, fanning him with leaves, soothing him when he started in his sleep—ah! what a troubled sleep it was—and wondering when *she* would come to join them and be happy, is the truth. (68:614)

At first glance, this passage seems to idealize fatherhood, even when that father is a vagabond and murderer. It is as though Barnaby simply needs to reunite with his father for his problems to be alleviated. Emphasizing the father, however, misses Dickens's point: at this moment, Barnaby is flooded with history, even if in the debased form of memories, for nearly the first time in the novel.¹⁴ What is fascinating about this passage is the way Barnaby refers a variety of recollections to his father. Barnaby's entire life has been organized around avoiding his father, both in person and through reference. His mother, understanding the truth of her husband's character all too well, has imagined only one possible outcome of their meeting: that it would irrevocably sunder Barnaby from reality. It does not go as she fears, however, in part because Barnaby is finally discovering that knowledge of his father allows him to attribute meaning to a variety of enigmas in his past. Yet it should also be emphasized that he experiences this meaning as a sort of threat: in a novel obsessed with the violence of the mob, it is startling that it is a "crowd" of ideas that breaks in on his troubled mind. Barnaby moves from a refusal of the past to a new, somewhat more open relationship with it, although it is still "vague," "dim," "shadowy," and frightening.¹⁵

While Barnaby does not improve right away, the encounter with his father does seem to help him. During the novel's closing summary of its characters' lives, the narrator reports on Barnaby. Perhaps surprisingly, considering his nervous breakdown after he is spared execution, the news is good:

Some time elapsed before Barnaby got the better of the shock he had sustained, or regained his old health and gaiety. But he recovered by degrees: and although he could never separate his condemnation and escape from the idea of a terrific dream, he became, in

other respects, more rational. Dating from the time of his recovery, he had a better memory and greater steadiness of purpose; but a dark cloud overhung his whole previous existence, and never cleared away. (Chapter the Last: 737)

Dickens does not pretend that Barnaby is cured, but he does try to give Barnaby a relationship to history.¹⁶ Barnaby moves from someone utterly at the whim of anyone's manipulation, to someone who understands, however rudimentarily, that one's past actions bear upon the present—although always enigmatically. The tension inherent in the last quoted sentence above is even more interesting, because it indicates Dickens's awareness of subjectivity's costs: Although Barnaby has a "better memory," a "dark cloud overhung his whole previous existence." What is the nature of this cloud? Is it a moral cloud, representing regret or repugnance for his crimes associated with his earlier ignorance? Or, as the grammar seems to suggest, is it a cloud of obscurity, so that Barnaby's improved memory dates only from his recovery? The latter option would give Barnaby a sense of the past, but at the cost of repressing some of the crucial events in his life.

Barnaby's "dark cloud," which nevertheless seems to bring clarity, contrasts vividly with Madame Defarge's bloody certainty. Barnaby serves, astonishingly, as a limited model for historical subjectivity, insofar as he shows himself capable of adapting to change, and of taking on new meanings. Understanding Barnaby in this way highlights the relationship between the novel's halves. In the remainder of the chapter, I try to clarify this hinge by unpacking some of the ghostly images in *Barnaby*. Especially in that novel, the ubiquity of ghosts works two ways. First, those haunted by past events understandably tend to focus on their fear of the past, to the exclusion of thoughts for the present or future. Second, the sheer quantity of ghosts eventually disrupts readerly certainty about the meaning of the past, indicating Dickens's hope for a different understanding of its import.

III. Ghosts and Guilt in *Barnaby Rudge*

Haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar.

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (1993)

Many of Dickens's early novels, such as *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843), and *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), focus on a

central theme, such as hypocrisy or pride, and embody it in memorable characters such as Pecksniff or Dombey. These novels are set in the “Dickensian present,” a nebulous timeframe that allows Dickens to draw interchangeably from contemporary sources and his childhood memories of London. The central idea of *Barnaby Rudge*, however, is different, as it is set explicitly in the past, and ostensibly turns on two analogies rather than on plots centering on such carefully delineated characters as Pecksniff and Dombey:¹⁷ first, that the historical situation of the 1780s closely resembles the early 1840s, when Dickens was writing; and second, that private worries—especially those associated with fatherhood—resemble or even produce public woe. Both analogies imply a symmetry at the heart of historical development: in the first analogy, the same conditions in disparate times will produce the same effects; in the second, public and private disorders are commensurate and can be translated into each other.¹⁸ Yet Dickens disrupts these analogies with metaphors of haunting that foreground the asymmetry of the novel’s cultural periods and arenas. The novel’s analogies thus function paradoxically, simultaneously promising and withholding historical knowledge. Indeed, in *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens offers up a historical novel that undermines the kind of historical analogies on which the genre depends.

Rudge’s critique of the historical novel genre is not in itself surprising, since Dickens’s express intent was to eclipse the Victorian novelists’ chief precursor, Walter Scott.¹⁹ In the criticism on *Rudge* there is a Bloomian tendency to see this conflict primarily as a matter of generational and professional rivalry. As Ian Duncan notes, “for most writers of Dickens’s generation, writing a historical romance was a professional rite of passage, mastering the dominant (masculine) cultural model and measuring oneself against its formidable parent” (221). Conceived in this way, a certain filial rebelliousness is to be expected. *Rudge* resembles Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818): both feature riots, an attack on a prison, and prominent mentally deranged characters.²⁰ However, *Rudge’s* revision of Scott moves beyond intergenerational conflict, and I would thus characterize Dickens’s rejection of Scott’s model differently. Dickens’s critique of Scott’s historicism does not mean that he is unaware of history’s claims. Instead, as we have seen, Dickens tries to open up a new relationship to history, one that allows him to conceptualize historical change without subscribing to determinism. Dickens’s philosophy of history refuses to reduce the past to a role as the origin of the present. For Dickens, the past is not dead; the past’s meaning should constantly provoke fresh questions, rather than obeisance to dead forms.

False, self-serving, and deceptively aestheticized histories circulate freely throughout *Barnaby Rudge*.²¹ In the hands of a lesser novelist, this pattern

would suggest the inability of fiction to convey historical truth. Instead, Dickens takes a surprising position: The difficulty with such stories resides not in their fictiveness but in their stubborn insistence on fact.²² As Juliet McMaster claims, in *Rudge* “those visions that move on the edge of consciousness—dreams, fantasies, chimeras of the imagination—recurrently leap into the center of the action, and are confirmed as being more real than the rationality that rejects them” (1). This striking tactic diverges from conventional “poetic license” by representing historical events as following the logic and processes of the imagination. The scenes of crowd violence populating the novel’s second half seem to step out of Barnaby’s fevered nightmares. This apparent connection between the private horrors of the Rudge family and the public ones of the riots, however, raises an obvious question: What can be the link between Barnaby’s half-remembered nightmares and the convulsive violence of a rebellious populace? Arguing that Dickens at times seems sympathetic to the rioters, some critics posit a simple kinship of marginality: mainstream society excludes Barnaby by virtue of his diminished abilities, just as it excludes the rioters by virtue of their class position.²³ Identifying such a connection inevitably leads these critics to reproach Dickens for, at the novel’s end, casting his lot with mainstream society against the rioters and Barnaby.²⁴ More problematically, asserting a direct connection between the novel’s private half and its public half diminishes the strangeness of the former, reducing the Rudge plot to an epiphenomenon of the overarching historical events of 1775 and 1780. Finally, such a reading cannot account adequately for the novel’s ending, in which Barnaby’s memories of his youth and Geoffrey Haredale’s self-imposed exile and virtual suicide haunt the unifying gesture of double marriages.

These problems may be resolved by qualifying the connection between the imaginative figures in the first half of the novel and the political events in the second. That is, although (as Steven Marcus and McMaster suggest) the events of the second half unfold like the nightmares and phantoms of the first half, the relationship between halves is merely one of resemblance, not identity or even analogy. In *Rudge*, Dickens underscores the vital difference between these levels of similitude by repeatedly pointing up the ways in which the stories we tell about historical events are evocative but wrong. The plot opens with Solomon Daisy, a denizen of the Maypole, recounting a murder story from 1753: Reuben Haredale is murdered for money, apparently by his gardener. Daisy’s story, for example, depends on the misidentification of Haredale’s unnamed gardener as the steward, Rudge, “scarcely to be recognised by his clothes and the watch and ring he wore” (1:58). Rudge’s substitution of his clothes for the gardener’s establishes a historical record, one that is obsessively retold at the Maypole and is enough to throw suspicion off the trail for two decades.

The doubling that emerges in this story, whereby Rudge disguises himself as his victim, symbolically killing himself, emphasizes the fascinating proliferation of haunting images in the novel's first half.²⁵ Many of these images are, naturally, associated with Rudge himself, as the returned murderer. He is initially described by the narrator as having a "cadaverous hue" (1:49). And when he meets Gabriel Varden, this corpse-like description is dramatically reinforced. Rudge is figured as Death himself, as well as a dying man and as a corpse: the "ruddy features of the locksmith so set off and heightened the excessive paleness of the man on horseback, that he looked like a bloodless ghost, while the moisture, which hard riding had brought out upon his skin, hung there in dark and heavy drops, like dews of agony and death" (2:64–65). There is a natural antipathy here between Varden, the novel's central point of virtue, and Rudge, the villain of the novel's first half. The redundancy of "bloodless ghost," apparently contradicted by the sweaty "dews of agony and death," points up the contradiction in Rudge's character.²⁶ Anyone in Chigwell who discovered his identity would think that he is in fact a ghost, because they all think him murdered. Figuratively, he haunts not only Chigwell, to which he later declares that he cannot help returning, but also his wife, Mary, and his son, Barnaby. Mrs. Rudge declares to Varden, "You do well to say he haunts this house. . . . His shadow has been upon it and me, in light and darkness, at noonday and midnight. And now, at last, he has come in the body!" (6:92). This speech consolidates the contradictory aspects of Rudge, who seems able to haunt from near and far. Although Mrs. Rudge sees herself as having endured the worst of all fates for the past twenty-two years, she also clearly feels that the worst has only now come upon her. Barnaby himself glosses the "shadow" in illuminating ways, finding it both precise and playfully misleading (6:94). As Rudge himself recognizes, he is one that "in the body [is] a spirit, a ghost upon the earth" (17:185).

In addition to blackmailing his wife, Rudge also haunts the site of his crime. Returning to Chigwell near the twenty-seventh anniversary of the murder, he is stricken with a ravaging guilt that seems to unhinge him. The Haredale family is Catholic, and their home, The Warren, is being attacked by a mob associated with the Protestant Association. Its defenders sound the alarm—the same bell that rang out the night Rudge killed Reuben Haredale. As if mesmerized, Rudge re-enacts the murder, stabbing at phantoms with a knife. The bell's "ringing summoned phantoms from their graves. What face was that, in which a friendly smile changed to a look of half incredulous horror, which stiffened for a moment into one of pain, then changed again into an imploring glance at Heaven, and so fell idly down with upturned eyes" (55:504). Like a hypnotic signal, the bell returns Rudge through twenty-eight years, to the very night of the murder.

Represented in the novel as a ghost since its opening pages, Rudge is now afflicted with his own ghosts. He can do nothing but repeat his past constantly, in part because his identity is entirely organized around eluding responsibility for it.

This patently deterministic model of history holds true for Rudge because he refuses to acknowledge his complicity with his past. Speaking to a compatriot, Rudge picks up on the curiously timeless aspect of his own guilt, reporting that he sees Reuben's ghost before him constantly, never changing. Moreover, he "struggled against the impulse [to return to the scene of the crime]. . . . The day and hour were none of my choice. Sleeping and waking, I had been among the old haunts for years—had visited my own grave" (62:561). In emphasizing his struggle to suppress his guilt, Rudge thus clarifies one of Dickens's insights about history: The refusal to engage with the past subjects one to its grip as surely as certainty. Rudge cannot recognize the role that his "choice" has played in his life, and he cannot, as a result, distance himself from his past. He effectively sentences himself to his grave—literally, in that the slain steward had been mistakenly buried under his name, and figuratively, in that his repeated haunting returns to Chigwell drove him to Newgate. Rudge thus complements Madame Defarge: At first glance, both characters' demises seem to be accidental or externally caused, yet the very contingency of these incidents turns out to be intrinsic to their situation.

On the one hand, Rudge's ghostliness deploys the language of melodrama and the Newgate novel.²⁷ However, it also strangely perturbs the novel's temporality.²⁸ The narrator's description of Mrs. Rudge's face affords an excellent example of this skewed temporality:

One thing about this face was very strange and startling. You could not look upon it in its most cheerful mood without feeling that it had some extraordinary capacity of expressing terror. It was not on the surface. It was in no one feature that it lingered. You could not take the eyes, or mouth, or lines upon the cheek, and say, if this or that were otherwise, it would not be so. Yet there it always lurked—something for ever dimly seen, but ever there, and never absent for a moment. It was the faintest, palest shadow of some look, to which an instant of intense and most unutterable horror only could have given birth; but indistinct and feeble as it was, it did suggest what that look must have been, and fixed it in the mind as if it had had existence in a dream. (5:87)

Dickens's readers are of course to infer that the "instant" which birthed this capacity for terror was Mrs. Rudge's discovery of her husband com-

mitting his crime—a sort of primal scene. However, the characters in the novel perceive this expression even though they do not yet know that Rudge is actually the murderer. As a result, her face appears to express an emotion it will have expressed, but has not yet done so. The future anteriority of her face is caught by Varden when he and Mrs. Rudge encounter the murderer upon his first return to London: “There, at last, was that dreadful look—the very one he seemed to know so well and yet had never seen before—upon her face. There she stood, frozen to the ground, gazing with starting eyes, and livid cheeks, and every feature fixed and ghastly” (5:90–91).

Mrs. Rudge’s terrified expression is rich with figurative possibilities, as is Varden’s reaction to it. Dickens exploits here an ambiguity in the word “ghastly,” which can of course mean both terrifying and terrified, and can be associated with ghosts in both senses. Some of Rudge’s spectral capacity for terror is thus transferred to his wife. Varden feels this keenly, as he spends part of the next chapter berating Mrs. Rudge for not allowing him to pursue her husband, who had fled upon seeing the locksmith. Varden muses to himself, “how came it to be that man; how comes he to have this influence over her; how came she to favour his getting away from me; and more than all, how came she not to say it was a sudden fright, and nothing more? It is a sad thing to have, in one minute, reason to mistrust a person I have known so long, and an old sweetheart into the bargain” (6:94). This is the first we learn that Mrs. Rudge is Gabriel Varden’s old sweetheart, and the timing of the revelation is unsettling. Varden does not seem to believe that Mrs. Rudge’s expressiveness has changed—that is, he does not register any new capacity for terror—over the years, which unmoors her face’s capacity for terror from her husband’s murders. (Naturally, it does not entirely uncouple her expression from the murders, but it does seem to render enigmatic the connection between the murder and Mrs. Rudge’s ghastliness.) Varden’s reaction mixes a lover’s jealousy with obliviousness, since the man he has just encountered is the rival who married his beloved. Additionally, there is a relationship between the future anteriority of her expression and the retroactive suspicion that Varden casts over Mrs. Rudge. In other words, the discovery that Rudge produces out of Mrs. Rudge a look that Varden has always imagined but never seen underscores, for Varden, the oddness of Rudge’s appearance at her door. Varden does not understand how that man in particular could possibly evoke such a reaction out of her—just as, in the past, Rudge elicited her love, whereas Varden could not.

I am unpacking this detail so doggedly because it shows how Dickens prevents us from entirely assimilating Barnaby’s and his mother’s present situation to Rudge’s murder. This difficulty of reference is exacerbated by

Barnaby's idiocy, because, despite all Mrs. Rudge's attempts to prevent it, Barnaby returns to his mother her own ghastly look. After the above encounter with her husband, Mrs. Rudge goes to Chigwell to renounce her annual income from Geoffrey Haredale, the surviving brother of Reuben. As it is the first time that she has returned to Chigwell since the murder, she has ample time to reflect upon her life with Barnaby:

Two-and-twenty years. Her boy's whole life and history. . . . How often since that time had she sat beside him night and day, watching for the dawn of mind that never came; how had she feared, and doubted, and yet hoped, long after conviction forced itself upon her! The little stratagems she had devised to try him, the little tokens he had given in his childish way—not of dulness but of something infinitely worse, so ghastly and unchildlike in its cunning—came back as vividly as if but yesterday had intervened. The room in which they used to be; the spot in which his cradle stood; he, old and elfin-like in face, but ever dear to her, gazing at her with a wild and vacant eye, and crooning some uncouth song as she sat by and rocked him, every circumstance of his infancy came thronging back, and the most trivial, perhaps, the most distinctly. (25:250)

This passage initially seems to say that Rudge's murders tainted Barnaby's mind even while in the womb, a nearly genetic transmission of evil. Consistent with Dickens's representational strategy in the novel, this passage's associations and resonances exceed such a manifest moral reading. On the one hand, Mrs. Rudge knows that "the dawn of mind never came." The familiar metaphor implies that, for Barnaby, reason never seized control of his passions. Such a reading corresponds with what little we know of his affliction: lack of memory, nonexistent attention span, diminished capacity for distinguishing reality from his imagination, and so forth. On the other hand, as we have seen, Mrs. Rudge has a ghastly look of her own, which makes undecidable the question of which parent is the source of Barnaby's ghastly expressions. His expressions—in particular, his "unchildlike . . . cunning"—are hard to fathom in such a diminished mind. We could even imagine that Mrs. Rudge works to keep Barnaby ignorant, to ensure he doesn't turn into his father. (A decision with devastating consequences, since Barnaby's flightiness causes him to fall under Gordon's spell.) In short, Dickens holds in tension the quasi-Lamarckian argument that Barnaby inherited his condition from his father as well as the argument that Barnaby's ailment is exacerbated by his childhood situation. Dickens does not quite say that Barnaby's father's

actions determine Barnaby's ailment—although those actions obviously produce effects.

The ghostly excess of causation that I have been emphasizing among the Rudge family is not a private curiosity. Instead, it constitutes the focus of Dickens's narratorial commentary throughout *Rudge*, as virtually every character and locale receives a spectral label at one point or another during the novel. The novel rhetorically binds ghosts and guilt, with the paradoxical effect that it is often the relatively innocent, such as Mrs. Rudge and Geoffrey Haredale, who are the most haunted, and who thus feel most intensely guilty. Rather than being merely ahistorical, *Barnaby Rudge* thus anticipates a ghostly motif in deconstruction. Derrida has recently suggested, for instance, that the possibility of haunting sustains the work of justice: "Without this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the question 'where?' 'where tomorrow?' 'whither?'" (xix). Conceiving of history as a haunting rather than as a cause, Dickens and Derrida acknowledge both the extent to which history produces us and the debts we owe the dead.²⁹ An anxious guilt is the currency in which this debt apparently must be paid.

IV. History's Cure

If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause—natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret—which says, "read me, will you ever be able to do so?"

—Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

Derrida's distinction between legacies and causes is a modern version of Dickens's account of history. Madame Defarge treats history as a cause: Doctor Manette's letter can have only one possible meaning, which can never be allowed to change. By contrast, Dickens's ghostly pattern of images from *Barnaby Rudge* allows him to represent the possibility of reading history differently. One of Dickens's surprising legacies is, I would argue, psychoanalysis, which similarly tries to battle against certainty in the name of a more supple, but also more responsible, relationship with the past. For Freud and Lacan, the conflict with which the analytic "cure" engages is always a fantasmatic one in the present. And the cure works, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, almost in reverse:

The Lacanian answer to the question: From where does the repressed return? is therefore, paradoxically: From the future. Symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively—the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning. As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier's network. Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way. (*Sublime* 56)

Psychoanalysis thus advances the startling—but also Dickensian—claim that one could suffer from fantasies about historical meaning, without turning the subject into an effect of history. The work of history and the work of analysis is not only to uncover new facts about past events, but also thereby to disrupt the familiar, equally self-serving and self-harming stories we tell ourselves—all in the name of a new story that is perhaps more capacious, more able to tolerate the demands of the present. Dickens's historical fictions paradoxically emphasize the structural limitations to historical knowledge, and the perilous consequences of attributing stable meaning to past events. In so doing, Dickens dramatizes the conditions of historical change, both rendering Victorian fables of progress more precarious and indicating the retroactive influence that contemporary reform can have, even on the dead hand of the past.

CHAPTER THREE

Causation and
Interpretation in *Shirley*

Great effects may spring from trivial causes.
—Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849)

Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) is clearly a social-problem novel; the difficulty lies in determining exactly what social problem Brontë set out to represent. Noting that Brontë wrote this novel of early nineteenth-century Luddite strife during a period of Chartist agitation, Terry Eagleton affirms "there can be no doubt that Chartism is the unspoken subject of *Shirley*" (45).¹ Yet Eugène Forçade insists, in a review Brontë herself endorsed, that "the novel could have been called *Shirley, or the condition of women in the English middle-class*" (143).² Such disparate readings arise from the novel's questionable analogy, comparing the enforced idleness of middle-class women with that of Yorkshire workers during a severe economic depression.³ Critics pursuing *Shirley's* class and gender themes again join hands at the novel's end, arguing that the novel enforces paternalism as a solution to the myriad problems of English society.⁴

Yet reading the novel as primarily an allegory of class or gender relations (or both) defangs Brontë's most interesting insights, diminishing *Shirley's* achievement relative to *Jane Eyre* (1847) and especially *Villette* (1853).⁵ As *Shirley* is fascinated by the problematics of causation, by contested interpretations, and by the limits of historical analogies, it arguably deserves closer attention, not least because it disrupts allegories of class and gender as much as it promulgates them. Brontë powerfully suggests that ideological explanations cannot exhaust motives in the social realm; she does not, however, assert that history is therefore void of causality. *Shirley* is thus a paradoxical social-problem novel, since it refuses to dramatize amelioration or reform as plausible, no matter how desirable.

In fact, at every turn, *Shirley* represents the most disorienting aspects of causation in early and mid-nineteenth-century society. Robert Moore debates with his workers over the reasons for the economic downturn, and

with Hiram Yorke and Mr. Helstone about solutions to the economic and political challenges of the Napoleonic Wars. Similarly, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone contend with men and between themselves about the rationale for women's marginalization. Brontë takes special pains to highlight the gap between personal intention and social effects; as Caroline muses, "nobody in particular is to blame, that I can see, for the state in which things are; and I cannot tell, however much I puzzle over it, how they are to be altered for the better; but I feel there is something wrong somewhere" (390). Such a gap emerges in the novel whenever issues of charity, employer-worker relations, and marital relations arise. Yet Brontë also shows that impersonal social forces do not "work" more reliably to explain the misery of characters: The workers are not simply disgruntled about the pace of technological change. As Christopher Lane explains, hatred works best in this novel, and even that seems to float freely of either volition or social factors.⁶

In order to interpret *Shirley's* interest in causation, I will examine three interrelated aspects of the novel: first, its fascination with unintended consequences; second, its ambivalence about reading; and finally, its related mistrust of historical analogies. In the opening section of the chapter, I interpret the bafflement Brontë's characters experience when confronted by the social order. *Shirley*, I argue, is drawn to and somewhat repelled by Adam Smith's "invisible hand" theory of self-interest, because while the theory decisively uncouples individual volition from the effects of one's action, the novel is profoundly skeptical that selfishness can produce anything but more selfishness. As a result, the novel offers a vision of a world in which neither beneficence nor impersonal forces can plausibly stabilize the social order. The novel's investigation of reading bridges its thematic obsession with causation and its form, especially Brontë's use of a third-person narrator. *Shirley* is the only Brontë novel with such a narrator, and this formal decision is apparently connected to her decision to set the novel thirty years in the past. Able to supply historical commentary that no character in the novel could know, *Shirley's* narrator potentially reigns unchallenged in the text. However, the various scenes of reading undermine the narrator as an uncontested certifier of reality. Such internal challenges to the narrator's authority thus dispute the official version of history in the novel, which ostensibly endorses Robert Moore's vision of technological and industrial progress.

A special instance of *Shirley's* fascination with interpretation is the use of historical analogies. The novel's opening chapters teem with characters appealing to such analogies in ways that other characters find fraudulent. The repetition of such examples suggests that Brontë may recognize the limits of her novel's chief temporal analogy, comparing the Luddites of

1811–12 with the Chartists of the late 1840s. In its awareness of how difficult it is to argue analogically about history, *Shirley* hints at arguments Friedrich Nietzsche would develop twenty-five years later in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874). By emphasizing *Shirley*’s balky intransitivity to social plots, I argue, we grasp its complexity more fully than can materialist or historicist emphases on the novel’s ideological dimensions. More generally, such a reading acknowledges the novel’s most profound response to the press of modernity: a recognition of the way traditional conceptions of causality seem irrevocably broken, and thus inadequate to contemporary problems.

I. “I See Myself Baffled at Every Turn by Their Untoward Effects”

Charlotte Brontë cannot help herself; she has a morbid tendency to anatomise every passion, every impulse, every expression. Hence what may perhaps be regarded as the chief defect of all Currer Bell’s novels, she must find a motive for every little act, for the twirling of a thumb, and for every tol-de-rol that a man heedlessly sings: she has no idea of purposeless behaviour, uncontrollable impulses without meaning, and idle flapping of the sails of the Happy-go-lucky.
—E. S. Dallas, Review of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (July 1857)

Although E. S. Dallas criticizes Brontë for specifying the cause of all actions in her novels, the characters of *Shirley* would likely be grateful to anyone who could explain why they suffer so intensely. In that novel, we discover a world that no longer responds to tradition, and where some forms of behavior appear purposeless. William Farren, Brontë’s most insightful worker, observes, “I’m getting different to myself: I feel I am changing” (140); as a result, he is willing to hate Robert Moore (though that man has done him no deliberate wrong), and even to endorse acts that cannot accomplish any aim beyond destruction.

The economic crisis at the beginning of the novel is itself an exercise in unintended consequences. Moore, lamenting that he cannot sell any cloth, observes that, thanks to the Orders in Council, “I cannot get on—I cannot execute my plans because of them; I see myself baffled at every turn by their untoward effects” (25). The effect of the Orders was “untoward” in two senses: the economic isolation is certainly unfavorable for manufacturers like Moore, and they are also unpredictable or unruly—Viscount Castlereagh, at least, did not expect the United States’s retaliatory closing of its markets. Factors such as Moore’s brusque manner, his recent arrival

from France, his limited capital, and his ardent desire to incorporate new technology into his mill all render his position even more precarious.

Moore tries to attribute both his own hardship and that of his workers to the impersonal workings of the market. In a heated exchange with Moses Barraclough, a self-styled leader of the workers, Moore almost welcomes his own destruction, because it would hasten the spread of technological progress:

The utmost you *can* do—and this you will never *dare* to do—is to burn down my mill, destroy its contents, and shoot me. What then? Suppose that building was a ruin and I was a corpse, what then?—you lads behind these two scamps, would that stop invention or exhaust science?—not for the fraction of a second of time! Another and better gig-mill would rise on the ruins of this, and perhaps a more enterprising owner come in my place. (136)

Moore defines himself as the friend of science and progress, and his mill as a politically neutral application of industrial principles. The intensity of rhetoric is meant to sound like a threat, too: If you loathe me, Moore seems to say, then I hope you get an even worse employer when I am gone.

Moore completely disavows any responsibility to the common good, arguing instead that because he has debts, he can think only of himself. In so arguing, he implicitly takes up Adam Smith's celebrated defense, from *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), of self-interest:

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good. (484–85)

Moore conceives of his position as replicating Smith's description. The best way he can accomplish anything for the community is to upgrade his technology and pay his debts, and to let the workers fend for themselves. But rather than taking up either the ethical or the economic implications of this argument, I want to stress its innovative approach to causation: Selfishness produces beneficence, almost inadvertently (and, by contrast, beneficence appears to cause poverty). Over the first third of the novel,

Moore offers many reasons not to help the workers: they are not his responsibility, he has no money, and, besides, he hates them for threatening the mill. His reasoning recalls the proverbial neighbor who, upon returning a broken kettle, first claims he never borrowed it, then asserts that it was already broken, and, anyway, he returned it undamaged.⁷ While our neighbor's sense of cause-and-effect has clearly gone awry, Smith's metaphor of the invisible hand renders such logic cogent. In fact, we could even say the invisible hand offers yet another defense of the broken kettle, claiming that it is now larger and easier to clean.

Shirley recognizes the explanatory power of Smith's metaphor for elucidating the causality of complex systems, yet refuses it on ethical grounds. Brontë's narrator dismisses the possibility that any good can come of self-interest, declaring that "All men, taken singly, are more or less selfish; and taken in bodies they are intensely so" (166). Society, she implies, could never reach a point where the common good would gain traction over self-interest. Further, self-interest can produce a common good only if the two factors are equivalently defined. As Smith puts it, anyone who wants to purchase a good or a service "will be more likely to prevail if he can interest [potential sellers'] self-love in his favour, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them. Whoever offers to another a bargain of any kind, proposes to do this" (15). From the perspective of Brontë's narrator, Smith's argument holds only if all parties value profit above all else. The novel condemns Moore for opposing the Orders in Council on economic grounds, claiming that an England ruled by merchants "would too often make ignominious submission—not at all from the motives Christ teaches, but rather from those Mammon instils" (166–67). The narrator accepts the manufacturer's analysis of his economic position, but insists that wealth cannot be the measure of national policy. Sometimes, in other words, a nation must wage war in order to maintain its honor, regardless of cost.

The complexity of Brontë's approach to causation indicates the limits of even sophisticated historicist approaches to the novel.⁸ What's more, the novel stages an argument about the legitimacy of materialist explanations. Joe Scott, Moore's foreman, proudly declares that after years of looking after the mill's machines, "I've gotten into that way that when I see an effect, I look straight out for a cause" (59). Moore is incredulous at Scott's confusion of different orders of causality:

You need not to think that because you've picked up a little knowledge of practical mathematics, and because you have found some scantling of the elements of chemistry at the bottom of a dyeing vat, that therefore you're a neglected man of science; and you need not

to suppose that because the course of trade does not always run smooth, and you, and such as you, are sometimes short of work and of bread, that therefore your class are martyrs, and that the whole form of government under which you live is wrong. (60)

Moore illustrates here an important difference between causality in the physical and symbolic realms. If a process stops working in the physical world, then it can be repaired, but in the realm of culture, matters are more enigmatic. Historicist interpretations, according to Moore, tend toward arrogance, because they claim to understand vastly complex situations. In turning to the novel's interest in the proliferation of interpretations, then, I will suggest that characters in the novel offer mutually unintelligible readings of events as their only possible response to forces and emotions that routinely outstrip their grasp.

II. Reading

Shirley represents conflicts about class, nationality, and gender as conflicts over interpretation. Prominent examples of this strategy include conversations between Caroline Helstone and Robert Moore, Moore and the workers, Caroline, Shirley Keeldar, and Joe Scott, and Moore and Hiram Yorke. We might interpret Brontë's use of a third-person narrator as an attempt to control this interpretive conflict by providing a meta-perspective capable of revealing a scene's underlying truth. Such a perspective would mesh well with the polemical focus of most social-problem novels, as the narrators of such novels strive to move readers to action. Yet Brontë's strategy is different: The novel undermines all interpretive stances, including the narrator's. Interpretation becomes a vehicle of self-interest in *Shirley*, rather than a way of accessing a potentially objective reality. John Plotz has argued recently that the conflicting interpretations in *Shirley* crucially recognize the workers as a legitimate voice in the public sphere. Once all interpretations prove self-interested, then middle-class Victorian readers cannot dismiss the workers' claims as readily as they might have hoped.⁹ *Shirley* takes a more radical tack, however: Rather than acknowledging working-class and middle-class interpretations as (at least potentially) equally legitimate, *Shirley* implies that all such claims are illegitimate. The novel's conflicting interpretations echo the wider breakdown in causal expectations that I have been interpreting. Because the world is not mutually meaningful to all parties—that is, because various disputants cannot find a common language or methodology for resolving interpretive disputes—characters and groups in the novel advocate their own position regardless of their overall costs.

Shirley's suspicion of interpretation differs from Brontë's other novels, though *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* (1853), and *The Professor* (1857 [1846]) each feature moments when conflicting interpretations come to the fore. For instance, *Jane Eyre* famously opens with Jane's conflict with the Reed family, and with her subsequent dispute with Mr. Brocklehurst over the most virtuous passages in the Bible. In that novel, however, we are nearly always meant to side with Jane—no reader could pretend that either John Reed or his mother treats Jane fairly. The vehemence of Jane's insistence on her arguments' validity is itself a sign of the legitimacy of her claims for affection and respect. *Villette* echoes this strategy when the perspectives of Lucy Snowe and Madame Beck clash. At such moments, the existence of divergent interpretations does not suggest that they are equivalent, but that one is right and the other wrong, or even evil.¹⁰

Theorists of realism argue that it offers a symbolic universe that helps readers orient themselves in the social world.¹¹ And as Eliot's narrator asks in *Adam Bede* (1859), since Hetty Sorel "had never read a novel . . . [, how] could she find a shape for her expectations?" (135). Because that symbolic order misfires in *Shirley*, the novel famously finds itself torn between realistic and romantic impulses, a rift that the narrator cannot adequately resolve. In late Romantic and early Victorian accounts of the novel, especially those influenced by Scott, an interest in probability and consistency drives the shift from romance to realism. Brontë's narrator urges the reader to "calm your expectations" for "sentiment, and poetry, and reverie[,] . . . passion, and stimulus, and melodrama" (5). And when Robert seems to reject Caroline, the narrator cruelly emphasizes the distinction between romance and realism: "You expected bread, and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it, and don't shriek because the nerves are martyred. . . . You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm" (105). The narrator's distinction between sentiment and reality follows Scott's distinction between romance and realism; further, it adheres to the implied promise of social-problem novels—to show the reader the world as it is, rather than as we like to imagine it. The narrator touts the reality of *Shirley's* account of society, and indeed goes so far as to claim that this novel is superior to all rival social-problem novels:

[T]hough I describe imperfect characters (every character in this book will be found to be more or less imperfect, my pen refusing to draw anything in the model line), I have not undertaken to handle degraded or utterly infamous ones. Child-torturers, slave masters and drivers, I consign to the hands of jailers; the novelist may be excused from sully[ing] his page with the record of their deeds. (61)

Brontë scornfully disdained the melodramatic accounts of industry found in novels such as Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839).¹² And her narrator here ventriloquizes that disdain, thus offering to disclose reality more adroitly than had her predecessors. Likewise, the ostensible refusal to idealize characters anticipates George Eliot's similar proclamations in *Adam Bede* (1859). Yet there is something enigmatic about this passage, because the point of the social-problem genre as such is that certain kinds of abominations were going unpunished—abominations the narrator professes here to ignore. The narrator's power to "consign [wrongdoers] to the hands of jailers" is the power of poetic justice, a characteristic more strongly associated with romance than realism.

Shirley in fact revels in this tension between realism and romance, which finds the narrator clamorously affirming the priority of realism yet also smuggling in forms of romance. After all, the denouement of the marriage plots, as Caroline and Shirley marry the brothers Moore, is scarcely credible, given the novel's extended, passionate denunciations of the marriage market. Likewise, the novel's ending is silent about ongoing class conflict, as the narrator sees "the manufacturer's day-dreams embodied in substantial stone and brick and ashes" (645). The narrator does skeptically qualify Moore's triumph, noting with an apparent sigh that "I suppose Robert Moore's prophecies were, partially, at least, fulfilled," and calling his new mill's chimney "ambitious as the tower of Babel" (645). With this closing Biblical reference, the narrator implicitly acknowledges the futility of both Moore's and the novel's unifying projects. What these comments show us is a shift to fantasy and prophecy from the sedate realism that the narrator promises at the novel's opening.

This shift, I argue, is tactical rather than merely symptomatic, inasmuch as it qualifies in advance elements of the novel's ending. Rather than seeing *Shirley* as concluding, as does *Jane Eyre*, with a satisfactory marriage to a domesticated, formerly domineering, man, we might recognize it as closer to *Villette*, where Lucy Snowe allows the most stubbornly idealistic reader a tenuous faith that Paul Emanuel did not drown near the end. It is as if, having promised reality to the reader, *Shirley's* narrator recognizes that only fables are possible—or, rather, that the only ending that could unify the novel's disparate interests is a fantasy. Indeed, the narrator slyly hints at this at the very start: "It is not positively affirmed that you shall not have a taste of the exciting, perhaps towards the middle and close of the meal" (5). Because the narrator associates "a taste of the exciting" with melodrama and romance, we can construe this sentence as promising an abandonment of realism. Such an understanding is consistent with *Shirley's* skepticism about the efficacy of intentions. Finally, there is a metacritical reason to infer that the novel seems aware of the inadequacy

of its closing gestures: If we hold the novel to be a panicked response to Chartist activism in the late 1840s, then this implies an awareness that the impersonal economic and technological forces on which Moore relies cannot guarantee social harmony. While Brontë privately characterized the Chartists as an “ill-advised movement” (*Wise Lives* II:203), *Shirley* suggests that expecting beneficence from the social order is “ill-advised.”

Reading the ending skeptically does not imply that we must naively endorse the beginning of the novel. Despite the narrator’s mocking irony on the novel’s first page, Brontë herself is not averse to passion and sentiment, properly conceived. In January 1848, she and George Henry Lewes exchanged letters about realism and the novel, using Jane Austen’s fiction as a chief example. Brontë chides Lewes for “lectur[ing]” her to “familiarize my mind with the fact that ‘Miss Austen is not a poetess,’ . . . and then you add, I *must* learn to acknowledge her as *one of the greatest artists, of the greatest painters of human character*” (*Lives* II:180, emp. in original). She then asks a withering rhetorical question: “Can there be a great artist without poetry?” (*Wise Lives* II:180). Of course, when *Shirley*’s narrator disavows “sentiment, and poetry, and reverie,” it means to dismiss conventional frippery and melodrama, not the kind of poetry to which Brontë refers. Nevertheless, her riposte to Lewes is relevant to my reading of *Shirley*, since it reminds us that what animates this “real, cool, and solid” narrative are concerns that block a secure picture of society.

Shirley’s fascination with reading and interpretation far surpasses its narrator’s metafictional commentaries. The novel features several key scenes of reading, which direct our attention to the biases of interpretation. The most prominent of these depict Caroline’s reading of *Coriolanus* with Robert and her argument with Joe Scott about the book of Timothy. In these moments, Caroline’s methodology contradicts itself: in the first, she invokes Shakespeare as a timeless conveyer of universal truths, while in the second she reveals herself to be a good historicist. The narrator does not invite us to see this shift as progress, or even as something of which Caroline is aware. Instead, interpretation becomes entirely contingent on factors that elude social determination. Aesthetic and historicist readings alike are only ways of making people act in accordance with one’s own desires, rather than revealing something true about the world.

Nancy Armstrong has argued that *Shirley*’s representation of reading is the novel’s most salient historical argument. The key to the novel, she writes, is “the role it attributes to literature in effecting certain historical changes” (214). Her key example is the famous “Coriolanus” chapter, a “scene of reading that both initiates the historical transformations characterizing Victorian literature and represents a model of the communication situation in which such transformations occur” (214). Armstrong argues

that the nineteenth-century novel is a training ground for middle-class subjects to learn how to take up their classed and sexed identities. When Caroline entices Robert into a joint reading of *Coriolanus*, then, they are readying themselves for marriage. Such a project, Armstrong claims, strips Shakespeare of his historical context, turning him into a purveyor of universal truths about subjectivity.

I want to suggest, by contrast, that *Shirley* shows us the futility of asking literature to effect political or subjective reform. Instead, it exposes literature as a permanently contested site of variant interpretations. In turning now to Caroline and Robert's reading of *Coriolanus*, I want to suspend momentarily the (entirely legitimate) question of how Shakespeare's play comments upon Brontë's characters. Although Caroline clearly aspires to reform Robert's manner with his workers, she picks a strange text as her exemplum. Their reading arguably reinforces, rather than transforms, Robert's character. *Coriolanus* is, according to Caroline, "an old English book . . . that you like; and I will choose a part of it that is toned quite in harmony with something in you" (89). As she rhapsodically claims that Moore must "take some of [Shakespeare's] soul" into his own, he sardonically asks whether this reading is "with a view to making me better; is it to operate like a sermon?" (89). No, she replies, it should "stir you; to give you new sensations. It is to make you feel your life strongly, not only your virtues, but your vicious, perverse points" (89). Caroline here unwittingly acknowledges that there can be no guarantee that Robert will accept her reading of the play. While she clearly means that he will now recognize his "perverse points" as faults, we could as easily say that he will experience them more strongly. After all, *Coriolanus* is a play that Robert already likes, and it is in "harmony" with aspects of his personality, so it is difficult to understand why Caroline thinks their reading will do any good.

The narrator echoes Caroline's optimism, but does so ambivalently. While listening to Caroline read, Robert finds himself "stepping out of the narrow line of private prejudices, beg[inning] to revel in the large picture of human nature, to feel the reality stamped upon the characters who were speaking from that page before him" (91). Although such a claim seems to support Caroline's view, "human nature" is consistently represented in *Shirley* as selfishness.¹³ For example, the narrator calls all men selfish (166), and William Farren states that "Human natur', taking it i' th' lump, is naught but selfishness" (326). Shakespeare's play becomes the vehicle for reinforcing selfishness, rather than tempering Robert's brusqueness.

The scene ends without any agreement as to its meaning. Caroline tells Robert that "you must not be proud to your workpeople; you must not neglect chances of soothing them, and you must not be of an inflexible nature, uttering a request as austere as if it were a command" (93). He

dismisses her reading, claiming, “That is the moral you tack to the play” (93).¹⁴ By the logic of the scene, Robert is strictly correct here. Caroline begins by claiming that the play would move Robert’s emotions, but ends by treating it as a sermon. Meanwhile, the play authorizes a kind of self-ishness, rather than the vague appeasement she recommends here. Unpacking William Hazlitt’s reading of *Coriolanus*, Lane shows how “our experience of art is so intoxicating . . . that we seek ways of replicating that excitement in public life” (211). For Moore, Lane explains, reading Shakespeare’s play is far likelier to incite his misanthropy than to encourage his self-improvement.

Appeals to human nature are not Caroline’s only strategy. Later in the novel, she threatens to embark on a rigorously historicist reading of the Bible. While arguing with Caroline and Shirley whether women can be credited with independent thought, Joe Scott, Moore’s foreman, appeals to the authority of St. Paul’s 1 Timothy. In that epistle, Paul explains that women should submit to their husband’s authority on spiritual matters. Caroline refuses to accept such an uncongenial decree:

Hem! I—I account for [Paul’s arguments] in this way: he wrote that chapter for a particular congregation of Christians, under peculiar circumstances; and besides, I dare say, if I could read the original Greek, I should find that many of the words have been wrongly translated, perhaps misapprehended altogether. It would be possible, I doubt not, with a little ingenuity, to give the passage quite a contrary turn. (329–30)

Caroline here wittily adopts the methods of the higher criticism in order to tweak Joe’s pretense at superiority. Although when reading Shakespeare, according to Caroline, we must allow his language to play upon our nature, we can read the Bible as aggressively and contingently as possible in pursuit of our own truth. Her adoption of such a posture implicitly confirms Robert’s earlier complaint, that she had simply “tacked a moral” to *Coriolanus*. Although she accuses Joe of being “dogmatic” (330), Caroline herself adroitly conceives of reading as a way to persuade others, rather than to transform herself. The sententious Joe deserves his comeuppance in this scene, and I am not endorsing his reactionary interpretation of 1 Timothy. My point is simply that *Shirley* represents its characters as adrift in a world without secure meanings, in which they have to fight for their interpretations in order to make sense of the world. These interpretations, however, do not *disclose* the world so much as provoke or incite it, in the hopes that a change will happen.

Psychoanalysts know well the folly of expecting interpretations to pro-

duce a desired effect in analysands. In fact, Lacan is even driven to declare that “An interpretation whose effects are understood is not a psychoanalytic interpretation” (“Responses” 114/“Réponses” 211). The wholly desirable enigma of interpretation marks the ethical distinction between psychoanalysis and therapy. In *Seminar XX: Encore*, Lacan wryly jokes that “People do History precisely in order to make us believe that it has some sort of meaning. On the contrary, the first thing we must do is begin from the following: we are confronted with a saying, the saying of another person who recounts his stupidities, embarrassments, inhibitions, and emotions. What is it that we must read therein? Nothing but the effects of those instances of saying. We see in what sense these effects agitate, stir things up, and bother speaking beings” (45). History is an incitement, one only tangentially related to the facts of the past. The narratives and interpretations we give to that past do not disclose to us the meaning of our lives; rather, they bind us to or authorize us to relinquish actions in the present. In the next section, I show how Brontë examines a particularly insidious mode of interpretation, that of constructing analogies with the past in order to guide conduct in the present.

III. *Coriolanus* and the Deceptiveness of Analogies

Monumental history deceives by analogies.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” (1874)

“On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” registers Nietzsche’s rejection of a century of historicism in German thought.¹⁵ According to his taxonomy, monumental history is historiography attuned to great deeds; it can inspire further greatness, but, as the epigraph suggests, it can greatly mislead. We might imagine our own historical situation to recall exactly an earlier epoch, and act accordingly. We also tend to imagine ourselves as comparing only to the most favorable historical figures. Because it concerns only the splendid outcomes of heroic acts, monumental history “as far as possible avoids causes, . . . which, fully understood, would only demonstrate that the dice-game of chance and the future could never again produce anything exactly similar to what it produced in the past” (70). Historical icons blind us to the exigencies of the present, duping us into viewing our conditions through the prism of other times. Not surprisingly, then, Nietzsche’s theory of history is not a mode of hero-worship. Instead, he proposes a critical historiography, in which the active members of a given society rewrite their history in order to sustain their creative activities.

Shirley prefigures Nietzsche's critique of monumental history. Its opening chapters mercilessly expose the ways in which characters use historical analogies to legitimize their own desires. If for Nietzsche the historical analogy blinds us to causation, Brontë shows us the causal forces we conventionally eclipse in the process: personal animosity, self-interest, self-love. Although the novel's characters believe analogical reasoning will guide them toward the best solution to the economic crisis, *Shirley* demonstrates that such reasoning will more likely inflame conflicts between persons and groups. A crucial analogy in the novel is that between Robert Moore and Coriolanus, an analogy which the narrator's fascination with the Duke of Wellington reproduces. The paradoxical effect of this double analogy is to cast doubt on all such reasoning: Rather than reinforce each other, the reduplicative analogies seem to disperse each other into sheer arbitrariness.

One of the most striking features of *Shirley's* representation of the Yorkshire workers is that they seem knowledgeable about the past and about socioeconomic forces. To representatives of the middle and manufacturing classes, this knowledge makes the workers all the more terrifying. If, as William Farren acknowledges, the workers know that smashing Robert Moore's mill is counterproductive, then their persistent desire for violence seems irrational.¹⁶ Reverend Helstone introduces this striking thirst for vengeance in the novel's first chapter, as he describes Mike Hartley, an Antinomian weaver:

When he is very drunk, his mind is always running on regicide. Mike is not unacquainted with history, and it is rich to hear him going over the list of tyrants of whom, as he says, "the revenger of blood has obtained satisfaction." The fellow exults strangely in murder done on crowned heads, or on any head for political reasons. I have already heard it hinted that he seems to have a queer hankering after Moore. (15–16)

This is one of the most telling descriptions in *Shirley*, as the novel's critique of historical analogies and its fascination with unintended consequences coalesce. Hartley's familiarity with history grants him a noble alibi for his desire to kill Robert Moore. Moore's refusal to employ weavers makes him a tyrant, and therefore worthy of destruction. Hartley can attribute his "queer hankering" for Moore's death as a sign of his own love of justice, rather than as a delight in murder. While Hartley's use of history as an alibi is suggestive of Brontë's disdain for analogical reasoning, his allusion to the book of Numbers is the key to this passage. Chapter 35 of Numbers expounds the laws of revenge: When can the family of a slain person revenge themselves upon the killer? The first answer is that if the killer

acted deliberately, his or her life is forfeit, and the victim's family can take revenge themselves: "The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meeteth him, he shall slay him" (Numbers 35:19). Hartley takes this answer as authorizing Moore's execution: From the weaver's point of view, Moore is deliberately starving his workers, and can justly be killed.

But Numbers exacts two further conditions before sanctioning vengeance. First, the "revenger of blood" must renounce any affect toward the killer, and even an explicit plan to claim the revenge that is due: "If he [the revenger] thrust him of hatred, or hurl at him by laying of wait, that he die; Or in enmity smite him with his hand, that he die: he that smote *him* shall surely be put to death; *for* he *is* a murderer" (Numbers 35:20–21). Hartley's "queer hankering" after Moore means that the rules legitimating revenge no longer apply, and the desire to kill Moore is essentially a desire for mutual destruction. The second criterion addresses the relationship between volition and causation. If the killer could not have known that the victim would die, or if the victim died through an unintended consequence of the killer's action, then the family cannot take revenge. In such a circumstance, "the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood" (Numbers 35:24). As Moore cannot be held personally responsible for the economic consequences of his actions—especially since, as we have seen, another manufacturer would replace him if he died—Hartley can gain no comfort from the book of Numbers.

As such critics as Patrick Brantlinger and John Plotz have argued, *Shirley* is not a novel that treats the workers as stupid, and the novel does not simply dismiss Hartley as a buffoon (Brantlinger *Reading* 114; Plotz 171). Instead, he is caught up in a horrible problem: Confronted with economic and symbolic universes that have made causation enigmatic, how is he to make sense of the world? The complexity of the situation is what makes the analogical reasoning of monumental history so appealing. Analogies provide answers, but to problems that no longer exist in quite the same way.

Shirley does not disparage the analogical reasoning of its workers only. Indeed, Helstone soon finds himself caught up in an argument with Moore about such analogies, as part of their overall dispute about the legitimacy of the Napoleonic War. Moore sees Napoleon as an "omnipotent master-spirit," while Helstone is confident that "Wellington is the right champion of a good cause" (38), and because his cause is right, he must ultimately prevail. Moore replies that "God often defends the powerful," which provokes Helstone to launch an extended analogy between England's war with France and the Israelites' flight from Egypt. Just as

God allowed the Israelites to escape the tyrannical Egyptians, Helstone insists, so too will he allow Wellington to triumph. Moore's response anticipates Caroline's reversal of Joe Scott: "You are all right, only you forget the true parallel. France is Israel, and Napoleon is Moses. Europe, with her old over-gorged empires and rotten dynasties, is corrupt Egypt; gallant France is the Twelve Tribes, and her fresh and vigorous Usurper the Shepherd of Horeb" (39). This answer shows why analogical reasoning fails as an adequate historical explanation. We cannot know with any certainty whether the correspondences that we find between another historical period and our own are accurate or warranted. The quarrel between Helstone and Moore has an even more disturbing implication: Reversing Helstone's analogy makes the distinction between good and evil problematic. We cannot ascertain whether Napoleon is "truly" Israel or Egypt until he has either won or been defeated. So not only does analogical reasoning break down, but when it does so it also threatens what remains of the symbolic universe.

The Duke of Wellington plays a key role in *Shirley*, one paradoxically tied to the *Coriolanus* lesson. Brontë's narrator repeatedly extols Wellington's military might and, as we have seen, condemns the manufacturing class for refusing to support the war. However, the novel is at a loss to explain—indeed, cannot even bring itself to mention—Wellington's disastrous opposition to parliamentary reform. The novel's silence on this score, I will argue, invites us to read Wellington, in addition to Moore, as a stand-in for Coriolanus. Wellington's political failure thus looms ominously over Moore's own personal transformation. If Wellington himself could not handle reform adequately, the narrator seems to suggest, then how can a mere mortal like Robert Moore? *Shirley's* representation of Wellington as a foil for Moore foregrounds Brontë's skepticism about historical analogies.¹⁷

As Christopher Lane suggests, Moore has a misanthropic "propensity to copy Coriolanus," which Brontë "improbably convert[s] . . . into a hazy notion of sociability" (210). The mechanism of this conversion is his and Caroline's belief that his fault is chiefly one of manner—in other words, a superficial defect rather than a fundamental flaw. Caroline's advice to Moore, cited above (be more soothing, and less proud and brusque), reflects this belief. But as Lane demonstrates, the connection between Moore and Coriolanus is far more extensive, registering a Hazlittian affinity for the seductiveness of power, especially of abusing power. *Shirley* arguably exposes the difference between style and superficiality: Through the figure of Wellington, Brontë's narrator acknowledges there are moments when one's manner echoes structural components of one's identity, instead of only surface polish. This commonplace emphasizes the

improbability of domesticating Moore, and thus of reconciling the industrial conflicts that disrupt England.

At the end of the novel, as I have suggested, *Shirley* shifts into the realm of fable, in which Robert can become a suitable husband and employer. Were Brontë's narrator to acknowledge explicitly the self-indulgent nature of this fable, it would of course fall to pieces. Instead, she does so by praising the Duke of Wellington, a sleight-of-hand that allows the novel to endorse its fantasy of social harmony, even as it recognizes that fantasy's limits.¹⁸ The narrator sums up Wellington's deeds at the end of 1812 in this way:

In this year, Lord Wellington assumed the reins in Spain: they made him Generalissimo, for their own salvation's sake. In this year, he took Badajos, he fought the field of Vittoria, he captured Pampeluna, he stormed St. Sebastian; in this year, he won Salamanca.

Men of Manchester! I beg your pardon for this slight résumé of warlike facts: but it is of no consequence. Lord Wellington is, for you, only a decayed old gentleman now: I rather think some of you have called him a "dotard"—you have taunted him with his age, and the loss of his physical vigour. What fine heroes you are yourselves! Men like you have a right to trample on what is mortal in a demi-god. Scoff at your ease—your scorn can never break his grand old heart. (637)

The narrator's address to the men of Manchester is puzzling. If the listing of Wellington's victories is "of no consequence," then why proceed? The narrator's apostrophe here eclipses the Duke's troubled reign as Prime Minister (1828–30), which saw him undergo much criticism for endorsing Catholic Emancipation, and even more brutal attacks for refusing parliamentary reform. What is striking here is less the narrator's implicit comparison between Moore and Wellington than the narrator's abrupt transformation *into* Moore. Brontë's narrator here echoes explicitly Moore's passionate denunciations of his workers—an echo most explicit, perhaps, in the off-handed aggression of a phrase like "it is of no consequence." Yet *Shirley's* readers' knowledge of Wellington's political collapse must color the way we read the novel's fables of closure.

Wellington's response to the demand for parliamentary reform illustrates why style is not only superficial. After the election of 1830, the tension over reform was dramatic. Earl Grey's first speech in the post-election Parliamentary session acknowledged that the people must have reform. Shockingly, "by an almost inconceivable error of judgment, Wellington

chose to reply,” saying that “not only was reform inappropriate, and that he had no intention of proposing it, but that the existing constitution was so perfect that he could not imagine any possible alternative that would be an improvement” (E. A. Smith 23). The government fell within weeks, and a new cabinet was formed around Grey. James Grant, a parliamentary reporter, noted Wellington’s declaration “was not only the most foolish that he ever made,” but “was decidedly the most imprudent that ever proceeded from the lips of a Minister of the Crown. It could not fail to prove, in the then existing circumstances of the country, the destruction of the government” (qtd. in Smith 5–6). Charles Greville, Clerk to the Privy Council, recorded in his journal:

Never was there an act of more egregious folly [than the Duke’s declaration], or one so universally condemned by friends and foes. . . . The effect produced by this declaration exceeds anything I ever saw, and it has at once destroyed what little popularity the Duke had left, and lowered him in public estimation so much that when he does go out of office, as most assuredly he must, he will leave it without any of the dignity and credit which might have accompanied his retirement. (qtd. in Smith 26)

Wellington was hissed at and accosted by crowds whenever he appeared in public, there was a run on the Bank of London, and plans were drawn up for the possible quashing of a revolution. What these nineteenth-century observers register is how political observers in and out of Parliament experienced Wellington’s callous, even insolent, reply as expressing an astonishing preference for his own power rather than a willingness to acknowledge political necessity.

The narrator’s passionate endorsement of Wellington, then, ironically emerges as a qualified skepticism toward Moore’s plans, and about the possibility of his genuine transformation. As Lane explains, Brontë cannot tolerate too ardent a love of power in Moore, so she emplots him in a narrative of domestication. However, she is able, through the comparable figure of the Duke of Wellington, to acknowledge that such a pleasure in power could easily override social harmony. By folding literary history onto “real” history, Brontë suggests that appeals to either are false and self-serving, and the fantasy of reform at the novel’s end must remain only that. Admittedly bleak, such a perspective nevertheless offers a more interesting take on the contemporary Chartist uprising than does the dream of reconciliation that Moore and Caroline’s marriage seemingly exemplifies.

CHAPTER FOUR

George Eliot's Crises of
Consequence

I. The Picture and the Diagram

A key moral and aesthetic question for George Eliot was whether history progresses teleologically. If it does, then art's purpose is to disclose that truth; if it does not, or if one cannot know whether history has an aim, then art has no such foundation. The best it can do, as she frequently insists, is to tell the truth as precisely and concretely as possible. By examining Eliot's correspondence with Frederic Harrison, I will argue in this chapter that Eliot replaces a teleological model of history with one based on guilt and self-doubt, allowing her model to move backwards and forwards through time. Subsequently, through readings of her essays and of *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866) and *Middlemarch* (1871–72), I interpret Eliot's fascination with our desire to attribute meaning to historical events and figures. The past always threatens to disrupt the present, in her view, so that we can never be sure that we have achieved progress. Teleological approaches to history reconcile past suffering by referring it to a glorious future. For Eliot, however, such a reconciliation can be accomplished only by betraying our past; she suggests that such a betrayal can never achieve its promise.

Harrison's combination of wide-ranging interests and polemical devotion to positivism made him a valuable correspondent for Eliot. As a lawyer, he could provide her with advice on the inheritance plots of *Felix Holt* and *Daniel Deronda* (1876); as someone who gave public lectures on history after 1862, he shared her abiding sense that communal identity is possible only when grounded in reverence for the past; and as a committed adherent to Comtean philosophy, he gave her a private opportunity to demarcate her own distance from it.¹

Harrison's disagreements with Eliot did not end with her death in

1880. In an uncredited role, he helped John Cross with the proofs for his *Life and Letters of George Eliot* (1884).² He subsequently reviewed the book for the *Fortnightly Review*, praising Cross's innovative weaving of Eliot's journals and letters, and his abstemious withholding of overt commentary. Reviewing the biography of a recently deceased artist offers a natural opportunity to reflect on the artist's career, and Harrison did not miss his chance. Praising Eliot as one of the most important minds of the century, he nevertheless judged that her novels after *Silas Marner* (1861) bear the burden of her intellect too heavily, and consequently prevent her from being a first-rate novelist. The terms of his dismissal resonate with Eliot's preferred metaphors for novelistic creation: "The canvas of laborious culture is too often visible through the colouring of the picture. We find so much to think about that we crave a little rest for simple enjoyment" ("Cross's *Life*" 315). On its own merits, this is a defensible, even common, reaction to Eliot's post-*Romola* fiction: Many readers have found Eliot's later novels too aggressively learned. Given Harrison's involvement with Cross's proofs, however, it is difficult not to read this as a cheap shot: Harrison silently reverses an analogy Eliot had used against him in a letter twenty years earlier—a letter not printed in the Cross text but since made available in Gordon Haight's publication of Eliot's *Letters*.

Harrison's request that Eliot write a novel dramatizing Comtean principles forms the crux of their 1866 exchange. The correspondence thus explicitly addresses the relationship of theory to practice and implicitly comments on the validity of the theory. Eliot declined in an expression that has since become famous, claiming that if aesthetic teaching "lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram[,] it becomes the most offensive of all teaching" (IV:300).³ She further reveals that she expends an "agonizing labour . . . [of her] English-fed imagination to make art a sufficiently real back-ground, for the desired picture, to get breathing, individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience" (IV:301). Harrison's 1885 review essentially claims that Eliot's labor went for naught—indeed, that her novels would be relieved by a little of the diagram, in order to give her readers a reprieve from the intensity of Eliotic representation. Even after her death, Harrison misses Eliot's point: Her letter implies that her novels are at least as interested in failures of symbolization as in anything resembling representational transparency.⁴ She acknowledges having "a consciousness tending more and more to consist in memories of error and imperfection rather than in a strengthening sense of achievement" (IV:300–301).

Harrison and Eliot disagree about the importance of pain in history and in art. Indeed, Eliot's emphasis on pain causes her to withhold assent from

Harrison's proposal, though this represents Harrison's chief complaint about her fiction. For example, he found Harold Transome's rebuke of his mother, in *Felix Holt*, "too intensely painful" (IV:265). Harrison's resistance to pain stems partly from his Comtean interest in historical progress. In "The Use of History" (1862; collected in *The Meaning of History*, 1894), he argued repeatedly that the scoundrels and mistakes of the past are best forgotten, the better to concentrate on the triumphant story of civilization's development. Harrison bitterly condemns both the historian's and the reading public's interest in vice and tragedy: "And they call this history. This serving up in spiced dishes of the clean and the unclean, the wholesome and the noxious; this plunging down into the charnel-house of the great graveyard of the past, and stirring up the decaying carcasses [*sic*] of the outcasts and malefactors of the race" (9). From Harrison's point of view, most of the past resembles Frankenstein's creature, an abortive project that can only titillate and degrade our understanding of culture, rather than enhance it. By contrast, true history for him "teaches us something of the advance of human progress" (10). As I shall show momentarily, while Eliot acknowledges progress, she refuses Harrison's view that progress is the whole or even most interesting story to be learned from history.

When Eliot warns of lapsing from the picture to the diagram, she is not dismissing the "diagram"—in this exchange, Comtean theory—as too idealized. Such a neat distinction would oversimplify the complex workings of pictorial metaphor in realist fiction. As Eliot acknowledges in the exchange with Harrison, in *Romola* (1862–63) she turned towards historical fiction in order to achieve the "necessary idealization" (IV:301). She seems to imply instead that Harrison's theory misunderstands the process of history and composition. Her letter is full of suffering: the "agonizing labour" of composition, the "unspeakable pains" of researching *Romola*, and her preference for "pain and terror" over "admiration and delights" (IV:301–2).⁵ Eliot associates the difficulty of her writing with her own "mind morbidly desponding." How could such a mind, her letter asks, produce a work committed to a theory of progress? Although the pangs of composition are not exactly those of morbid despond, the letter suggests that they end up in the same place, as her tragic novels achieve their effects by dramatizing pain in order to win her readers' sympathy.

My interest in Eliot's understanding of suffering is not psychobiographical speculation. Instead, I find productive in her account the link between pain and symbolization's failure. Historical narratives cannot, in her view, be only narratives of progress; they also literally hurt, as they remind us of opportunities missed and wrongs committed. Conceiving of Eliot's argument with Harrison in this way does not merely help us grasp her refusal of Comte's system (an ultimately biographical question), but also clarifies

Eliot's interest in the intractable dimensions of fiction and history as well as her hint that any identification that ignores this intractability must fail.⁶ In subsequent sections I return to this complex relationship between identification and history.

In this sense, Eliot's powerful faith in the past's haunting relevance affiliates her more closely with such thinkers as Wordsworth and Burke than with Comte. Edmund Burke's idea of culture as an "entailed inheritance" serves as an important backdrop to Eliot's thought, because it clarifies the value of thinking about history, even if such thought cannot offer unequivocal guidance to present problems. We can draw an analogy here between Eliot's view of history and her "consciousness tending more and more to consist in memories of error and imperfection rather than a strengthening sense of achievement" (IV:300). While Harrison sees history as marching triumphantly towards the future, Eliot's conception of memory arrests her in the past, disrupting her self-presence. From Eliot's perspective, a teleological history would be plagued by a forgetting of our predecessor's, or even our own, suffering. The point of history, she suggests, surpasses accomplishing something new; we also must atone for what we have become. In her earlier essay on "The *Antigone* and Its Moral" (1856), Eliot argued that the key to tragedy is "two principles, both having their validity, [but that] are at war with each" (263). For Eliot, history is tragic in this sense, because progressive and conservative impulses battle within it, and neither is ever wholly dominant. So from this perspective, it is impossible to distinguish between specifying how society has developed over time and plundering Harrison's "charnel-house of the great graveyard of the past." Eliot understands the past and present as structurally inseparable yet incommensurate, mourning the tendency for accounts of progress to dispense cheerfully with the past, and marking the past's ability to overthrow even the most triumphant present event. History is thus ontologically paradoxical for Eliot: an impossible ground that simultaneously underwrites and overturns identity.

II. The Defense of Historical Consequences

The master key to [divine] revelation, is the recognition of the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world—of that invariability of sequence which is acknowledged to be the basis of physical science, but which is still perversely ignored in our social organization, our ethics and our religion. It is this invariability of sequence which can alone give value to experience and render education in the true sense possible.

—Eliot, "The Progress of the Intellect" (1851)

In her biography of George Eliot, Rosemary Ashton argues that this statement about causation, from Eliot's first published book review, represents a "philosophical standpoint from which [Eliot] would never deviate" (76). Beyond this "philosophical" perspective lies the bulk of progressive nineteenth-century historiography and science, and it is easy to find evidence supporting Ashton's claim in Eliot's *oeuvre*.⁷ Eliot's adamant insistence on this perspective often obscures other approaches to causation and history. However, as we have seen, Eliot has a paradoxical experience with the "*invariability* of sequence": while she believes in it as a principle, her consciousness is always trying to go backwards and forwards.

However, there is another Eliotic perspective on history and causation, emerging obliquely in her early reviews, apparently against their explicit aim. This other perspective is, in the early essays, too nebulous to warrant its own label, but it works mainly to disrupt Eliot's advocacy of organicist approaches to social theory.⁸ Two of Eliot's most prominent assertions of organicist principles, "The Progress of the Intellect" (1851) and "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), demonstrate the argument I am advancing.

In the first of these two reviews, Eliot glowingly assesses Robert Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect, as Exemplified in the Religious Development of the Greeks and Hebrews* (1850), in part because it expresses historiographic ideas she finds congenial. Her review opens by defending the study of history against followers of Comte who urge a practical focus on the present. Predating Marx's famous contemporary complaint that the "tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (595), Eliot declares that modern society is oppressed by the "petrifications" of the past, obsolescent ideas and mores that no longer respond to present needs (28). As a result, the study of history is the most valuable mode of learning, because it alone can give us any perspective on cultural change. She claims that people will be better prepared for progressive sentiments if "by a survey of the past, it can be shown how each age and each race has had a faith and a symbolism suited to its need and its stage of development, and that for succeeding ages to dream of retaining the spirit along with the forms of the past, is as futile as the embalming of the dead body in the hope that it may one day be resumed by the living soul" (29). Although the meaning of this vivid analogy is clear, it is also disquieting. After all, the implicit metaphor of society's "stage of development," which figures society as a growing organism in which the relation between stages is transformative, clashes with the image of a corpse, which represents historical change as death. Neither figure sits easily with "petrification," which implies calcification.

More than an oddly macabre image is at stake here: To associate histo-

ry with death disrupts the essay's otherwise prevalent argument that society is improving teleologically, as well as Eliot's affection for historical ties. Were Eliot interested only in organicism, we could conclude simply that no creed can outlive its time. However, there is a more interesting conclusion to draw from her argument: namely, the purpose of historical study is to help us relinquish our identification with the past and, potentially, with the present. She suggests that modernity is an epoch that breaks with the conditions of the past, but during which people continue to believe in the relevance of the past's mores. If we think of historical change as a mode of dying, we might see that our own identity is more contingent than we perhaps are comfortable believing. I'll soon show that both *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* make this complex relationship between fantasy and identity a central topic of investigation.

History for Eliot here represents a speculative habit of thought, not simply a set of facts, stories, or morals drawn from the past. It becomes a mode of hygienic self-forgetting:

It may be doubted, whether a mind which has no susceptibility to the pleasure of changing its point of view, of mastering a remote form of thought, of perceiving identity of nature under variety of manifestation—a perception which resembles an expansion of one's own being, a pre-existence in the past—can possess the flexibility, the ready sympathy, or the tolerance, which characterizes a truly philosophic culture. (“Progress” 29)

Rather than valuing historical knowledge for its own sake, Eliot implies that the study of history disrupts our self-image.⁹ History is, according to Eliot's narrator in the later novel *Middlemarch*, a path leading out of our “small hungry shivering selves” (II:XXIX:277); it is one of the ways to transcend the “moral stupidity” into which we are all born (II:XXI:208). Although history offers such transcendence, *Middlemarch* suggests (as I shall show soon) that it also offers our egoism an alibi. Likewise, “The Progress of the Intellect” simultaneously evokes and repudiates complacent teleological views of history.

“The Natural History of German Life,” another earlier review, also prominently features a clash between the organicist principles that Eliot enunciates and the images through which she illustrates them. Her review of Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl's *Die burgerliche Gesellschaft* (1851) and *Land und Leute* (1853) yokes statements of both aesthetic and historiographic principles, viewing both as directly related: she asserts that art needs concretely to represent the way people actually live. This scrupulous realism will, in turn, allow us to understand better their proper gover-

nance. Eliot famously describes this type of realism as reproducing the “*incarnate history*” of a populace, in her mind the concretization of millenia of development (287, emp. in original; see Graver “Incarnate”):

What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws. The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can take place only by the gradual consentaneous development of both. (287)

Although this is one of the clearest published statements of Eliot’s organicism, it contains again a strange mingling of development and death. On the one hand, the phrase “die out” implies an evolutionary perspective, in which maladapted social structures are, like unfit species, supplanted by more efficient ones; on the other hand, Eliot represents society itself as possessing some capacity for agency.

While Eliot tries to affirm an organic view of development, then, her key comparison—society’s historical development is akin to that of language (287)—does not support an argument about progressive development. Although our own perspective here is post-Saussurean, Eliot also views language as defeating any ideal correspondence between inside and outside, and between signifier and signified. As she writes,

one word stands for many things, and many words for one thing; the subtle shades of meaning, and still subtler echoes of association, make language an instrument which scarcely anything short of genius can wield with definiteness and certainty. Suppose, then, that the effort which has been again and again made to construct a universal language on a rational basis has at length succeeded, and that you have a language which has no uncertainty, no whims of idiom, no cumbrous forms, no fitful shimmer of many-hued significance, no hoary archaisms ‘familiar with forgotten years’—a patent de-odorized and non resonant language, which effects the purpose of communication as perfectly and rapidly as algebraic signs. Your language may be a perfect medium of expression to science, but will never express *life*, which is a great deal more than science. (287–88, emp. in original)

Eliot’s description of language emphasizes those elements, such as emotion and tropes, that interfere with its representational mission, implying that

language intransitively registers “life” through its inability to communicate clearly. The overall argument of “The Natural History of German Life” is that historical progress is at work in Europe, but it must emerge slowly, even organically. However, Eliot’s treatment of language complicates this overall argument by showing that progress itself is neither ideal nor guaranteed. After all, the description’s rhetorical power lies in demonstrating that while language changes over time, it does not evolve toward communicative transparency—for if it could, Eliot would want nothing to do with it. The rhetorical form of these sentences embodies the kind of intractability that their content extols—we note, for instance, the synesthetic image of a “deodorized language,” along with the prominent use of such figures as ellipsis (verging on parataxis) and alliteration.¹⁰ At first, this meshing of form and content appears to endorse Eliot’s organicist argument, and these sentences would accordingly have the function of a rhetorical set-piece whereby Eliot demonstrates her obvious mastery. Indeed, taken as an argument about the impossibility of artificially imposing political changes from above, the analogy with language is locally persuasive. But the surplus rhetoric trumps her argument about organicism, because she recognizes that language cannot communicate transparently, even within a single society. So although Eliot declares that language “must be left to grow in precision, completeness, and unity, as minds grow in clearness, comprehensiveness, and sympathy” (288), her argument has just made clear why this growth cannot happen, and is in fact profoundly undesirable. Her familiar allusion to Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* (1814) demonstrates this point, since language’s appeal emerges through archaisms redolent with memories and emotions linked with the past.¹¹ Eliot’s fondness for linguistic relics is most famously displayed in her pre-*Romola* fiction, perhaps especially in this well-known passage from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860):

These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows—such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. (I:5:34)

We see, then, inevitable linguistic anachronisms in Eliot’s writing, because language cannot correspond fully to the contemporary moment. This temporal delay enforces the tension I described among Eliot’s variety of images for the organic society’s development, because it suggests that time, as language registers it, is irrevocably out of joint. She attempts to resolve this

tension by claiming that historical development is like a seed: “The nature of European men has its roots intertwined with the past, and can only be developed by allowing those roots to remain undisturbed while the process of development is going on, until that perfect ripeness of the seed which carries with it a life independent of the root” (288). However, her interest in language’s anachronistic qualities suggests both the impossibility and the undesirability of such a “life independent of the root.”

Felix Holt and *Middlemarch* extrapolate these anachronistic qualities of language into a general view of history in order to dramatize our inability to apprehend causation at work. These novels register this conceptual blindness through the gaps between the plots and characters of these novels and the organic metaphors that narrators use to comment upon them. The word *register* here is carefully chosen: While, on the one hand, I am not convinced that Eliot seeks self-consciously to undermine her self-confessed faith in organic views of history, on the other hand a careful reading suggests that her novels obstinately reenact certain problems in the representation of organicism; the effect, on the whole, is to qualify significantly our ability to share her view. Eliot’s tepid representation of admirable nineteenth-century developments provides another striking instance of this ambivalence. In her notebook entry on “Historic Imagination,” she argued that historical narratives are valuable because they enhance our understanding of what is possible: Without them we lapse “into ridiculously inconsistent estimates of actual movements, condemning in the present what we belaud in the past, and pronouncing impossible processes that have been repeated again and again in the historical preparation of the very system under which we live” (447). In this fragment, historical narrative counters overly pessimistic conservatism.¹²

Perhaps because of this progressive strand of her thinking, many critics have reproached Eliot with self-contradiction.¹³ And we can concede that her later novels seem politically pessimistic. Consider *Middlemarch*: Eliot believed that the two most significant developments of her lifetime were reform and improved understanding of disease, representing both in the novel.¹⁴ Yet, the characters associated with these developments all end rather lamely—Will, the most articulate spokesperson for reform in the novel, has no world-making career; reform notoriously does nothing for Dorothea’s prospects; and Lydgate is wrecked, not only by his “spots of commonness,” but also by the aversion with which *Middlemarch* greets his work. Of course one can object that, for instance, Lydgate fails because he can’t adequately see the true scientific advances of his time, but this verges on question-begging: Why can’t Lydgate see this? These pessimistic tendencies often lead politically radical critics, especially those representing feminism or Marxism, to deprecate Eliot’s apparent incapacity to rep-

resent the possibility of collective action, or new ways of imagining gender or social relations, or even the progress that was in fact made in the nineteenth century.¹⁵ However, equating a particular character's ability to thrive with political representation reproduces high Victorian providentialism, in which the good prosper and the evil die—a perspective Eliot's fiction resists, despite her interest in the invariability of causation.¹⁶ While she does portray resistance to reform, such a view does not amount to political defeatism.

In turning now to *Felix Holt*, I want to focus on a narrative comment that is repeated there and in *Middlemarch*. In *Felix Holt*, the narrator famously claims: "there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life" (I:3:50). Likewise, in the "Finale" of *Middlemarch*, the narrator remarks: "For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (VIII:Finale:821). Yet the novels do not show us external constraint overriding psychic considerations. Instead, the novels anatomize the relationship between history and fantasy, arguing simultaneously for attention to history, on the one hand and, on the other, skepticism about the legitimacy of appeals to history. Eliot suggests that we are prone to finding historical justifications for our desires and actions, which she sees as illegitimate. However, she can only foreground that illegitimacy through historical narratives and their failure.

III. Stories of Origin in *Felix Holt*

Was there a motive at work under this strange reluctance of Arthur's which had a sort of backstairs influence, not admitted to himself? Our mental business is carried on much in the same way as the business of the State: a great deal of hard work is done by agents who are not acknowledged.

—Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859)

Felix Holt, the Radical suggests that what is true for Arthur Donnithorne holds also for the public sphere: unconscious motivations do not disappear from public business, but drape themselves instead in respectable clothing. The novel tries to explain why the First Reform Bill could not guarantee the beneficence of the Second; it tries, that is, to disrupt complacency about the inevitability of political progress. Eliot's narrator implies that we blame history for our desires and anxieties, so that even the most apparently altruistic public motives, or highest ideals, cannot exhaust our motivations. The novel dramatizes these concerns in two ways: first, by its

explanation of eventual reform at Treby Magna, and second, by its problematic hero.

Because its plot hangs on an election, *Felix Holt* allows Eliot to explore the nebulous motives underpinning action in the public sphere. The novel's account of election-day riots, poster-switching, workers surreptitiously selling their political affiliation for beer, and the transparent Machiavellianism of Harold Transome and Matthew Jermyn gives reform a thoroughly unsavory appearance. Yet as we have seen, Eliot correctly believed that the extension of the franchise was one of the most important achievements of the nineteenth century. To understand why she might want to make reformers seem so unappealing, let us consider a passage from *Felix Holt* in which Eliot's narrator explicitly comments on their tactics:

At that time, when faith in the efficacy of political change was at fever-heat in ardent Reformers, many measures which men are still talking about with little confidence on either side, were then talked about and disposed of like property in near reversion. Crying abuses—"bloated paupers," "bloated pluralists," and other corruptions hindering men from being wise and happy—had to be fought against and slain. Such a time is a time of hope. Afterwards, when the corpses of those monsters have been held up to the public wonder and abhorrence, and yet wisdom and happiness do not follow, but rather a more abundant breeding of the foolish and the unhappy, comes a time of doubt and despondency. (I:16:179)

In *The Spirit of Reform* (1977), Patrick Brantlinger influentially interprets this passage as an emblem of "the transformation of the idea of reform into progress and progressive evolution" characteristic of the 1860s (8). This development represents, according to Brantlinger, an abdication of politics. Calling a political change a "reform," he explains, means accepting that activism and political argument are necessary. But when change becomes "progressive evolution," such strategies disrupt the natural progress of history. He goes on to assert that the "primary causal factor" behind this transformation was "the increasing economic and political power of middle-class industrialism" (8–9). Granting Brantlinger's overall argument about the middle class's losing enthusiasm for reform, more than quietism is at stake in Eliot's novel. Instead, this passage emphasizes the difficulty of ascribing motive in the public sphere. Who could be against abuses? As Harold Transome makes clear upon his return to Treby Magna, however, the charge of "abuses" is often an alibi for a relatively uncomplicated will-to-power. Eliot hardly seems to substitute a theory of

evolution for one of reform; instead, she documents the eagerness with which everyone seeks noble-sounding justifications for personal gain.

The symmetry of accusations—"bloated paupers" and "bloated pluralists"—highlights the tit-for-tat nature of the discourse where "abuses" are the watchword of the day.¹⁷ Eliot implies that the transformation of abuses into monsters is the main obstacle to reform. Her pointed irony allows us to see that the rhetoric of "abuses" cannot counter future abuses because it is always incendiary—instead, the "corpses of those monsters" may well produce a "more abundant breeding." Rather than inveighing against reform in general, in other words, Eliot dramatizes the seductive appeal of the reformer, and the blindness inherent in such seduction. Eliot's position may be summed up thus: ask for less, and you may get more (but don't count on it!).

Felix Holt's third chapter explicates the private definitions that the characters of Treby Magna attribute to "reform." After a fantastically idyllic epigraph, the chapter shows how the citizens of the town construe historical events along traditional lines arising from earlier social hierarchies and their resultant interpersonal animosity. According to the epigraph, Treby Magna was "town, yet country too," the kind of place where one could hear from one's window the "tiny bleat of new-yeaned lambs, or see / The children bend beside the hedgerow banks / To pluck the primroses" (I:III:45). Evidently, the narrator admires the town's landscape and architecture as fine instances of English village life. But in ways similar to Eliot's next novel, *Middlemarch*, the town notices modernity in the arrival of a canal, coal mines two miles away, and the discovery of a salt-water spring; from these new developments, the townspeople learn several new vocabularies for discontent. For example: the "Catholic Emancipation Bill opened the eyes of neighbours, and made them aware how very injurious they were to each other and to the welfare of mankind generally" (I:III:48); and although "Tory, Whig, and Radical did not perhaps become clearer in their definition of each other[,] . . . the names seemed to acquire so strong a stamp of honour or infamy, that definitions would only have weakened the impression" (I:III:49). Such an environment lends itself to the interpenetration of public and private opprobrium; for instance, a Reform-minded grocer caught using weighted scales metaphorically represents to his customers the crookedness of Reform itself. At such moments, the narrator encourages us to see how motives coalesce.

Eliot also shows how, in another unintended consequence of reform, the machinery of the law gives unacknowledged delights to the citizenry. The novel's election is of course the first of its kind in Treby Magna—the first, that is, under the new terms of the Reform Bill. When the Revising Barrister comes to Treby to validate the list of qualified voters (those with

fifty-pound households), he must decide the appeals of marginally qualified voters and query others about the extent of their holdings. As the news of the Barrister's decisions drifts back to Mr. Pink's shop (the saddler happened to be at the center of male Treby gossip), Pink is proud to learn

whose votes had been called in question before His Honour, how Lawyer Jermyn had been too much for Lawyer Labron about Todd's cottages, and how, in the opinion of some townsmen, this looking into the value of people's property, and swearing it down below a certain sum, was a nasty, inquisitorial kind of thing; while others observed that being nice to a few pounds was all nonsense—they should put the figure high enough, and then never mind if a voter's qualification was thereabouts. (II:28:267)

Pink's "satisfaction" (II:28:266) at this peculiarly incisive news speaks to the exquisite piquancy of unmasking a neighbor—especially a heartless or exploitative one.¹⁸ Too, the court makes the property of others a legitimate topic of conversation, and especially the possibility of a gap between what the person professes to own and what the court determines he does in fact possess. Finally, the townspeople's response to the court is instructive. The auctioneer, Mr. Sims, laments that the Reform Bill's requirements are "done for the sake of the lawyers. Mr. Pink suggested impartially that lawyers must live, but Mr. Sims, having a ready auctioneering wit, did not see that so many of them need live, or that babies were born lawyers" (II:28:267). Without rising to the defense of the legal profession—and while conceding that the lawyer joke has been a staple of comedy at least since Shakespeare—it is striking how adroitly Sims turns Pink's observation about lawyers needing work to sustain themselves into a wish for their inexistence.

Felix Holt therefore emphasizes a clear-eyed understanding of what reform can and cannot accomplish. While the novel suggests that giving increased representation to the manufacturing towns and eliminating rotten boroughs are worthwhile goals, Eliot's narrator dramatizes how progress is never just progress: reforms always have unpredictable consequences, as people adapt their emotions to the new state of affairs. Historical developments offer new vocabularies for old grievances, allowing them to persist, though townspeople disavow them under the guise of modernity. Rather than focusing her novel on the debates around the Second Reform Bill, Eliot's narrator appeals to the political act ostensibly legitimating that Bill—the First Reform Bill, which of course only became "first" after the passing of the 1867 Bill. Instead of being the apocalyptic

act that many contemporary observers feared it to be, advocates of extending the franchise in 1866 saw the 1832 bill as an originary moment of modern democratic politics. Hence it is all the more valuable for my argument about determinism and false organicism that Eliot pays consistent attention to the limits of self-knowledge—especially the difficulty of knowing the causes of one's actions or predicting the consequences thereof, and of the meaning of those limits for political representation. These limits take on additional weight because *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* appear to reconstruct an important historical moment.

This uncertainty rebounds upon Felix Holt, Eliot's least appreciated protagonist. Contemporary reviewers such as R. H. Hutton and Henry James argued that he was too underdeveloped to sustain the novel's focus, and modern critics have argued that he stands for anything from middle-class bad faith about the merits of reform to a kind of hectoring misogynist who is not a credible match for the novel's heroine, Esther Lyon.¹⁹ Critics frequently argue that Felix may be taken as a spokesperson for Eliot—an argument that Eliot's "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt" (1868) unwittingly reinforces. Rather than alleging even a putative congruence between Felix and Eliot, I am emphasizing Eliot's fascination with nebulous motives to reinforce her prior ambivalence about whether historical narratives can sustain identity. Although Felix's speech often seems violently defensive or compensatory, this arguably attests to Eliot's uncertainty about whether the ideals Felix proposes are plausible as a strategy. In other words, Felix does not so much embody a set of propositional truths as give voice, no matter how unselfconsciously, to the difficulty of embracing those ideals.

Grasping Eliot's interest in the difficulty of making ideals and desires coincide helps us understand the most common Victorian criticism of *Felix Holt*: that it hides its protagonist's development. Hutton put this claim most vividly: "the great struggle in [Felix's] mind between political and moral radicalism which gives the thread of unity to the story is almost past away before it opens; and though it has left behind it a sort of torso enthusiasm which flings itself nobly but half wildly into the social life around, there is no sufficient development in the character, or doubt about its decisions" (258). Likewise, James lamented that the "dramatic antecedents" of the plot find no answering conflict in the novel (274). For both Hutton and James, *Felix Holt* seems disconcertingly to begin before its beginning: the narrative develops a curious mode of deferral, whereby the lag between a cause and its effects indicates both the complexity of causation and the tenacity of her characters' ongoing faith in it.²⁰

By representing Felix's conversion as taking place before the novel begins, the narrator introduces a note of doubt about his intentions, and even allows him to betray self-doubt. This maneuver has significant repercussions: Eliot's

strategy guarantees that readers will find her protagonist unsatisfactory, since there is a gap between his ideals and his enunciation of them. This gap manifests itself virtually every time he speaks, though he seems only intermittently aware of this. For instance, when he first meets Reverend Lyon and his daughter, Esther, Felix winningly describes himself as a “roughly-written page,” “a little too fond of banging and smashing” (I:V:60, 67). And the narrator claims that, though his “speech verged on rudeness, . . . it was delivered with a brusque openness that implied the absence of any personal intention” (I:V:68). Despite this absence of malice, though, we could not deny that Felix is quite rude to Esther, and several times during their conversation her father nearly takes offense. He claims that he is merely candid and blunt: “Those are your roundabout euphuisms that dress up swindling till it looks as well as honesty, and shoot with boiled pease instead of bullets” (I:V:70). Felix’s fantasy of the conversation as a mode of gunplay here further highlights his aggression.

As Hao Li has claimed, however, Felix’s “assertions lend his speech an authority more argumentative than moral. . . . Holt’s appealing tone sometimes vacillates between self-apology, self-righteousness and patronization” (114). Li focuses on Felix’s speeches to the working men in the novel, yet these characteristics are in fact omnipresent in his discourse. His mother finds him “masterful” (I:IV:56), and his first conversation with Esther is a constellation of quasi-malicious repartee. Eliot emphasizes how Felix’s self-righteous passions color even his sense perceptions. Because he is repulsed by Esther’s ladylike mannerisms, he avoids looking at Esther until he discovers her reading Byron: “Felix . . . was led at last to look straight at Esther, but it was with a strong denunciatory and pedagogic intention. Of course he saw more clearly than ever that she was a fine lady” (I:V:69). Eliot’s artful phrasing both confirms Felix’s supposition that Esther aspires to gentility and grasps how his delight in verbal battle shapes his perception of her. Because he wants to sneer at Byron, he is especially prepared to find her a “squirrel-headed thing, with small airs and small notions” (I:V:71). Saying this aloud steps somewhat past rudeness—we could even connect his declaration that Esther is “squirrel-headed” with his earlier preference for shooting with bullets. His speech arguably betrays an erotic violence lurking behind his love of argument.

By having Felix “converted by six weeks’ debauchery” in the novel’s pre-history (I:V:62), Eliot conspicuously highlights the ways that his convictions about the meaning of his past contribute to his violent speech. Although he refuses his father’s legacy—a “pharmacy” promoting quackery—he accuses his father of the greater refusal: “My father was a weaver first of all. It would have been better for him if he had remained a weaver. . . . I mean to stick to the class I belong to” (I:V:64). Felix’s simple-minded equation of class ambi-

tion with fraud contributes to his violent denunciations of Esther's consciousness of status. Similarly, Felix's own debauchery, in which he found himself "making a hog of myself" (I:V:62), tellingly repulses him. He subsequently reserves his strongest denunciations for indulgence. Byron is a "misanthropic debauchee" (I:V:69)—an epithet that may sound envious, considering how Felix recoils from his own dissipation. Workers who sell their opinions for beer also disgust him, as do preachers who purchase "a fine coat and a glut-ton's dinner" with their parishioners' money (I:V:64). Felix's opinions, however, link up with the novel's overall mistrust of the rhetoric of "abuses" and corruption. If in the political sphere, the cry of abuses acts as catalyst, inflaming partisan passions, then so too does Felix's attempt at leading the workers. In other words, one should read the violence of his rhetoric partly as compensatory, as geared toward repudiating in others what he fears to rediscover in himself; he denounces others so vigorously partly because they tempt him to relapse, not merely because they threaten the social fabric. Like a newly quit smoker who tries feverishly and self-righteously to make everyone else quit, Felix cannot accept that others might continue to enjoy what he has forsaken.

The result of this reading is a novel less patronizing to workers than Brantlinger implies, and more enigmatic than Hutton and James acknowledge. Although Eliot's narrator sometimes seems to echo Felix's program of moral reform, the protagonist voices them in such a way as to undermine their credibility. We could say that the novel invokes an ideal of moral progress, in order to show that it is no more secure than any other approach to reform. In this way, *Felix Holt* shows how appeals to history can provide a cover for other, less acceptable motives. The townspeople of Treby Magna use Catholic Emancipation and parliamentary reform as opportunities to vent against each other, and Felix converts his shame over his father's fraud into an exaggerated estimation of the virtues of the working class. If *Felix Holt* shows how easy it is for us to use our fantasies of historical meaning against each other, then Eliot's other reform novel goes farther still: *Middlemarch* demonstrates how our desire for a historically grounded identity is potentially an instrument of our undoing.

IV. *Middlemarch* and History

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning.

—Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876)

Although it derives from a different novel,²¹ this epigraph helpfully frames the debate between Jerome Beaty and Michael Mason over the status of history in *Middlemarch*. The former's classic essay, "History by

Indirection,” closes with these words: “few readers realize they are reading a novel full of documented, accurate historical information; none feels history obtrudes inorganically upon the fiction” (706). After Mason quotes these lines, he comments, “this is meant to be a compliment to *Middlemarch*, but it is a strange one. We may take the point about ‘inorganically,’ but the first part of the judgment seems to make a virtue of the irrelevance of what is admitted to be a carefully studied element in the novel—history” (419). Mason here performs a bit of a sleight of hand, substituting “irrelevance” for Beaty’s emphasis on the ubiquity of *Middlemarch*’s historical information. Moreover, Mason asserts that seeing the period of the novel “as a time of origins gives *Middlemarch* a dynamic aspect, a dimension forward in time” (419). This formulation gives Mason some trouble, as he must awkwardly explain that Eliot’s view of progress is not purely optimistic, and that there are many ways of representing progress in the novel (426–30). And as Eliot’s Carlylean epigraph suggests, she is skeptical that appealing to origins can fully ground narratives.

If the novel is not about origins, then we can understand why Lydgate does not prefigure later improvements in medicine, and of course why Dorothea does not go beyond rendering “wifely help” to Will (VIII:Finale:819). This argument may be surprising, given Eliot’s comment in “Historical Imagination,” cited above, that the aim of historiography is the “working out in detail of the various steps by which a political or social change is reached” (446). However, showing that change is possible and precarious is very different from endorsing triumphalist accounts of change. Additionally, Eliot is careful not to guarantee that past events will result in present or future beneficence. Rather than representing the Reform Bill as an origin, *Middlemarch* investigates the stakes of fantasmatically attributing causal authority to any historical moment.²²

Eliot focuses our attention on historical interpretation from the novel’s beginning, during a hilarious conversation among Mr. Brooke, Sir James Chettam, Casaubon, and Dorothea over agricultural reforms. Sententious Mr. Brooke recalls taking “in all the new ideas at one time—human perfectibility, now. But some say, history moves in circles; and that may be very well argued; I have argued it myself. The fact is, human reason may carry you a little too far—over the hedge, in fact. It carried me a good way at one time; but I saw it would not do. I pulled up; I pulled up in time” (I:II:17). Mr. Brooke’s account of the appeals and dangers of speculative theory is a sort of perpetual *non sequitur*, moving from political economy, to theology, to philosophy of history without any sense of how the concepts relate, or whether they are equally speculative. Eliot’s parody here points up the necessity of historical consciousness—without it, one has no guidance, only contingency.

But while Brooke's mind is clearly absurd, Casaubon's is ominous in its obsession with the past. He disdains the putatively speculative literary offerings of Brooke, insisting instead on his affinity for history: "I feed too much on the inward sources; I live too much with the dead. My mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it used to be, in spite of ruin and confusing changes" (I:II:17). Casaubon's description of himself as a revenant is, in part, an Eliotic in-joke: The last sentence also served as the description of the spirit in the "Proem" of *Romola*. However, the joke has its limits: Eliot seems less interested in "constructing [the past] as it used to be," than in understanding the past relative to some present conflict.

If Brooke is absurd and Casaubon ghoulish, then we might expect Dorothea to triangulate between the two.²³ Unfortunately for her own happiness, however, Dorothea is captivated by the desiccated scholar. Watching this exchange between Brooke and the "neat" Casaubon, she thinks that "Mr. Casaubon was the most interesting man she had ever seen. . . . To reconstruct a past world, doubtless with a view to the highest purposes of truth—what a work to be in any way present at, to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder!" (I:II:17–18). As in *Felix Holt*, Eliot's narrator wryly lets us glimpse how easily an intellectual rationale provides an alibi for libidinal responses, as Dorothea shifts from this early appreciation of Casaubon's "neat" person (especially in comparison with the "scrappy" and "slovenl[y]" Brooke) to an admiration for his goal. Dorothea even suggests that he is "remarkably like the portrait of Locke" (I:II:20). Eliot's narrator rallies subsequently to Dorothea's defense, observing for instance that "life could never have gone on at any period but for this liberal allowance of conclusions, which has facilitated marriage under the difficulties of civilization" (I:II:22), and noting Dorothea's disadvantage in being raised by her uncle. However, Eliot has also already shown us Dorothea's propensity for using historical identifications as an alibi for her own naïve and idealistic desires.

Reading *Middlemarch* in this light gives us a new perspective on what we might call Dorothea's "historical education," which begins before she is even introduced. It is commonplace to claim that the novel contrasts Reform-era England with the Spain of Saint Theresa, idealizing the latter as a historical moment during which one's inner yearnings coalesce with the opportunities and impulses of the social order. For example, in *Narrating Reality*, Harry Shaw offers an exemplary analysis of *Middlemarch*, in which he documents the extent to which even Dorothea's most fragmentary impulses arise from the press of historicity (229–36). Yet he sees the novel as offering up exactly this contrast between St. Theresa and Dorothea: "Even the vagueness of [Dorothea's] feelings results from

history. If Dorothea were in St. Theresa's age and place, her feelings wouldn't seem, they would be: they'd find clear expression" (235). This is a superb analysis of the prelude, one that silently points up its patronizing quality. I am not suggesting that Eliot's narrator is patronizing; instead, I believe the "Prelude" voices Dorothea's projection of Theresa, and so the patronization belongs to Dorothea. The idea that feelings used to "find clear expression," but no longer do, is a quintessential modern fantasy, because it represents the present as more psychologically complex (even if more alienated) than the past. *Middlemarch* exposes this fantasy as a dangerous will-o'-the-wisp, to which Dorothea initially clings but eventually must abandon. In effect, the novel argues that not only are there no "good old days," but the very fantasy that there must be causes us to misrecognize our motivations and desires in the present as the result of fate, destiny, or history. Because we imagine that desires and external circumstances once meshed, we risk forcing our own to do so.

Eliot's novel famously begins with a rhetorical question: "Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how that mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa?" (3). By opening the novel with a question, no matter how rhetorical, Eliot holds out the possibility of reading this passage as partially ironic: after all, not many Victorians would have thought about St. Theresa at all. More to the point, Eliot carefully shows that our fantasy of the past's harmony plays a crucial role in our demand for harmony in the present. Theresa's heart is "already beating to a national ideal," and she found "some illimitable satisfaction, some object . . . which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self" (3). Eliot's description makes clear the libidinal underpinnings—"hearts . . . beating," "illimitable satisfaction," "rapturous consciousness," plus the combination of "passionate, ideal nature" (3)—of Theresa's sense of purpose. Juxtaposing with the famous description of Dorothea's "theoretic" mind, which "yearned after some lofty conception of the world" and which was "enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects" (I:I:8), it is difficult not to view Eliot as having some fun with our fantasies of saints, and with our idea that history calls us, like them, to a particular destiny. In the "Prelude," we are given Theresa as Dorothea might have imagined her, a Theresa who complements most perfectly Dorothea's excesses.²⁴ The "Prelude," in other words, implies that the importance of history comes not from the correspondence of great forces to internal desires, but from our belief in this correspondence.

Dorothea's suffering in Rome confirms Eliot's interest in the fragility of historical identifications, and how they can create as many problems as

they solve. Jim Reilly claims that it is impossible to tell whether Eliot's narrator believes that unity exists in the world or is invented in the course of describing it. Moreover, Dorothea's experience in Rome, he argues, is symptomatic of Victorian dismay at the overwhelming copiousness of modernity, which Eliot shares with Matthew Arnold (48–51). What I would emphasize about this passage, by contrast, is the way that Rome's past attacks Dorothea, indicating her inability to conceive of history as teleological, even if she were able to see the "suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts" (II:XX:190).

Middlemarch's report of Dorothea's despair in Rome is famously aggressive: she finds a "stupendous fragmentariness," an "oppressive masquerade of the ages" with "gigantic broken revelations . . . thrust abruptly" upon her; Dorothea has "no defence" against the "unintelligible weight" of the city's past; the coexistence of classical ruins with a "sordid present" alarms her, and the city reveals simply the "monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation" (II:XX:190–91). The impact of this confusion is painful: the ancient statues, relics, and paintings "jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion" (II:XX:191). The crosscurrent of ideas and emotion is the crux of Eliot's analysis here: Because the private misery of her disappointing marriage distracts Dorothea, she is susceptible to a despair that the city's riotous confusion intensifies. Just as she quickly converted her desire to do noble works into desire for Casaubon, so here she equates her private suffering with Rome's historical legacy. Indeed, she is so "quick" and "ardent" that she "turn[s] all knowledge into principles" (II:XX:191); consequently, she finds in the city a mirror of her own experience, converting the city's "masquerade of the ages," via a variant of the pathetic fallacy, into a personal "masque with enigmatic costumes" (II:XX:190). Eliot dramatizes, through Dorothea, the complex interplay of causation between "inward being" and "public life": The outside does not simply *determine* the inside, as the narrators of *Middlemarch* and *Felix Holt* assert, even as they indicate otherwise; rather, the expectation of determination (or even simply correspondence) blinds us to the contingent interplay of desire with the external world. Through *Middlemarch's* first two volumes, Dorothea's automatic tendency to connect her outer circumstances with her inward desires and worries consistently leads her astray. Rather than lamenting the absence of modern-day Therasas in the "Prelude," then, Eliot is arguably warning us against the expectation that our desires will ever fully correspond with the outside world. If Eliot's novels have a moral teaching, this is it—that integrating desire and perception

is the key to right conduct. What makes these novels compelling, however, is her sense that we can only ever achieve this integration asymptotically.

By the time we reach the “Finale,” Dorothea has changed radically and, I would suggest, the narrator provides a different vision of Theresa. The narrator first claims that “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it” (VIII:Finale:821). In the next sentence, though, Eliot’s narrator recapitulates the argument in Eliot’s essay on “The *Antigone*,” admitting that “the medium in which [Theresa’s and Antigone’s] ardent deeds took shape is forever gone” (VII:Finale:822). Though the medium has changed, great deeds are still possible, and the challenge is to see them correctly. According to this reading, it is a mistake to try to reconcile one’s “inward being” with one’s fantasies about noble deeds. Indeed, Eliot dramatically reverses herself here. The “Prelude” closes thus: “Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are *dispersed* among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed” (4, my emphasis). In the finale, dispersal is no longer an issue: “the effect of [Dorothea’s] being was incalculably *diffusive*” (822, my emphasis). In these sentences, “dispersed” and “diffusive” function nearly as antonyms, despite their close denotative meaning. Here, the former indicates an impotent, fruitless exercise of power, while the latter denotes an ever-expanding circle of influence. Eliot’s feminist point from the “Prelude” still holds, insofar as it is tragic that women like Dorothea so frequently become mere helpmeets for their husbands. But grasping that the novel refuses the comparison with St. Theresa makes *Middlemarch* more, rather than less, historically specific, because it diminishes our tendency to treat Dorothea as a saint. In other words, it diminishes her aura of uniqueness, and highlights how historical forces constrain her options as her fantasies about identification exacerbate those constraints.

Although Eliot’s reform fiction expresses skepticism about the prospects of reform, it is, I have argued, not simply quietist or defeatist. Instead, *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* dramatize how our fantasies about historical meaning sustain dubious desires, and especially the ways that history can serve as an alibi for individuals and communities. Eliot qualifies narratives about the past that simply legitimate the conscious intentions of the present. Her novels continually represent the failure of conscious intentions and of consequences to coincide, showing us why some of her characters’ appeals to the past take on a defensive, justificatory air. In setting *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* around 1832, Eliot tries to suggest the limitations of thinking of the Reform Bill of 1867 as the “Second

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Reform Bill." She thus undermines the kinds of high Victorian complacency with which she is sometimes identified. She unsparingly exposes, that is, two complementary fantasies: the idea that our social context thoroughly determines us, and the idea that we escape determination absolutely. What is most difficult to confront in her fiction is how easily these unconscious attitudes commingle with even our noblest aims.

EPILOGUE

Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Centuries

The Future History of the Victorian Novel

What I have tried to suggest throughout this book is that we seem to believe in Victorian historicism more than key Victorians did themselves, or at any rate, we seem to believe that the Victorians believed in historicism. However, Victorian writers' historical consciousness could frequently be interestingly fraught with ambivalence and internal contradiction, in ways that are arguably closer to their own experience of historical change. In other words, whatever they professed to believe, Carlyle, Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot (all of whom of course believe different things) produce texts that seem closer to historical experience than the self-conscious arguments made on their behalf. In short, while these writers may have believed they were arguing historically, our own belief that they were striving toward historicism, combined with our own wish to do justice to marginalized voices, has blinded us to these writers' real interest, which lies in capturing the baffling temporality of self-conscious historical change. If we suspend briefly the relentless imperative to historicize, I have tried to argue, we can find in Victorian literature powerful tools, not only for understanding historical change, but also for grasping how limited our understanding of such change must be in our own time.

This book's original title was *Lost Causes: Psychoanalysis and Victorian Literature*, which was a bit misleading inasmuch as the book doesn't spend that much time on psychoanalysis. But that subtitle did offer both a specific conceptual promise and a bit of gallows humor, which are worth sketching briefly. As I have argued throughout the book, in both Victorian

literature and psychoanalysis we find an innovative, and still poorly understood, representation of causality, one which is arguably more interesting than the historicist methods currently used to interpret the literature. On this account, true causes are primally lost, never to be satisfactorily linked up with the effects that they determine; while this loss can be unsettling and even pathogenic, it is also what allows for change, whether in persons, discourses, or even cultures. This version of causality offers an internal resistance to historicism, a supplement to historical argumentation without which historicism risks sterile aridity.

The joke is less abstract: Defending the psychoanalytic account of *anything*, much less a nonsexual topic such as history or causality, seems a bit of a lost cause these days, especially outside of English or cultural studies departments. Outside the academy, the clinical efficacy of psychoanalysis is either openly ridiculed or simply bypassed by pharmacological interventions. Inside the academy, the influence of historicist theories, as well as theories rooted in identity politics and the self-inflicted wounds of reductive psychobiographical approaches, have lessened Freud's influence significantly. In 1978, Richard Altick could survey the field of Victorian criticism and note that "Apart from the continuing work of a few experts, the psychoanalytic approach seems to have passed the zenith of its promise" (19). While it is a striking coincidence that 1978 also saw the first United States publication of Jacques Lacan's *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, it would be hard to deny the essential truth of Altick's claim: For while the "return to Freud" has reinvigorated psychoanalytic studies of literature and culture over the past twenty-five years, Victorian studies has largely found Lacan's "gnomic propositions" rather more baffling than illuminating.¹ While psychoanalytic approaches—and often quite brilliant ones—to Victorian fiction continue to be published and to be well reviewed, one could hardly make the case that there has been a great upsurge in psychoanalytic criticism.² I want to suggest that psychoanalysis's future depends on recognizing that the historically popular elements of psychoanalytic criticism—sex, sexuality, and the perversions; symbolism; the stages of development—distract us from more interesting and useful arguments about the relationship between time, causation, and being. This distraction, perversely enough, turns out to repeat the structure of repression itself; a structure that we find schematized in many contemporary works, ranging from glossy pulp like *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) to such neo-Victorian fictions as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine* (1991), Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002).

In *The Matrix Reloaded*, the nonhuman information trafficker known

as the Merovingian makes a long speech about “the only real truth; causality. Action, reaction. Cause and effect” (69). Overriding Morpheus’s human insistence on choice, the Merovingian arranges a demonstration, in which a piece of cake that he has written forces a young woman into an intense burst of erotic feeling. He describes the way “each line of the program creat[es] an effect, like poetry” (69). Lost on the Merovingian—who is, after all, a program—is the key difference between code and poetry: code’s effects are, even in massively complex computer programs, relatively straightforward. When a program calls a function or a subroutine, there is no confusion about what happens. For literary language such as poetry, however, this straightforward relationship between cause and effect no longer obtains, nor does the relationship between the author’s intention and the experience of the poem’s audience. The Merovingian only grasps poetry, code, and causality at the level of meaning. He insists, “Our only hope, our only peace is to understand it, to understand the why. Why is what separates us from them” (70). The conviction that causes can be referred to meanings is the root of the Merovingian’s strength—it facilitates his trafficking in information—but it is also what prevents him from being able to stop Neo’s revolutionary attempts to end the war between humans and machines.

While it perhaps seems absurd to move from the sober realities of Victorian social-problem texts—and especially the moral seriousness of writers like Carlyle and Eliot—to an ephemeral movie (and a disappointing sequel at that!), this scene foregrounds the way sex, causality, and understanding are repeatedly yoked together. In *The Difference Engine*, Gibson and Sterling contrast revolutionary, manifesto-driven claims for historical narrative with more fluid, emergent crystallizations borrowed from chaos theory. In so doing, they unwittingly borrow from Carlyle. In Stoppard’s *Voyage* (the opening play in *The Coast of Utopia*), the sisters Liubov and Varenka discuss the mechanics of sex, while the object of Liubov’s desire discusses Kant’s discussion of causality (17–18). What all of these texts point to, time and again, is the way that sexuality and causality are metaphorically entangled—what they have in common is a recognition of enigma, and the limits of our ability to find meaning in our lives. In Victorian fiction and in psychoanalysis, this enigma is a resource for psychic and political change, a guarantor that the symptoms, social or otherwise, afflicting us today are alterable, possibly even for the better.

NOTES

Notes to Introduction

1. It is not hard to find testimonies, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, vouching for the importance of historical consciousness for the nineteenth century, and I discuss some later in the introduction. Michel Foucault famously called the period “the Age of History” (*Order* 217), and Jerome Buckley’s *The Triumph of Time* documents how far-reaching such consciousness could be.

2. Suzy Anger’s excellent introduction to her recent anthology, *Knowing the Past*, begins by connecting Strachey’s witticism with recent debates on epistemology (1).

3. The clearest articulation of this lament in Arnold is the “Preface” to *Poems* (1853).

4. Here I adapt slightly a point Charles Shepherdson makes in *Vital Signs: Nature, Culture, Psychoanalysis*: He points out that the fact that we understand sexuality discursively opens sexuality toward history, rather than toward nature, without reducing sex to an effect of discourse (6–7).

5. Psychoanalysis has a cognate set of fantasies that I discuss in the opening sections of “The Time of Interpretation.”

6. Reading private and public experience as “incommensurate” bears a clear debt to Christopher Lane’s discussion of “Victorian asymmetry” (*Burdens* 1–43). Stephen Jay Gould also invokes asymmetry to explain the failure of biologically inspired Victorian historiography: “Not only as an anomaly of human history, but also as a signature of nature, pasts can’t imply futures because a pattern inherent in the structure of nature’s materials and laws—‘the great asymmetry’ in my terminology—too often disrupts an otherwise predictable unfolding of historical sequences” (211).

7. See Copjec 68.

8. In “Revisiting ‘Mr. Bennett,’” I argue that this obstinate instinct fleshes out Bennett’s interest in the mutual foundering of subjective and social experience.

9. Arguing from a hermeneutic point of view, Anger takes a similar point of view. See especially 7–14.

10. Fredric Jameson explains that after 1848 the historical novel “takes the external world as a mere dead decorative spectacle. . . . and yet which at the same time paradoxically uses that decorative background as the pretext for a host of *projections* of contemporary psychological states (i.e., ennui, anxiety, neurosis), but also contemporary philosophical issues and concerns, into a past in which they have no place” (“Introduction” 3).

11. Armstrong argues that the early nineteenth-century novel attempts to subjectivize its readers, rather than engage in political reform. Brantlinger (*Spirit*), Jameson, and Lukács all claim that the Victorian novel withdraws from political engagement

beginning in 1848. Catherine Gallagher (*Industrial*) argues that novelists after the 1850s begin to emphasize moral, rather than political, representation.

12. A task performed admirably by Jann and Dale, as well as the various contributors to Anger's *Knowing*.

13. Jim Reilly comments that "Nietzsche's fearsome rhetoric would hardly be exaggerated if, as Foucault suggests, the nineteenth century has impaled itself on the paradox whereby history is seen both as the very 'mode of being of empiricity' and as 'no longer compatible with representation'" (20).

14. Reilly discusses Nietzsche's belief that the nineteenth century has been "ruined by history" on 18–19.

15. As Hayden White explains, in "place of a sequence of cause-effect relationships as the model for viewing the evolution of any given biological or social phenomenon, Nietzsche substituted the notion of a set of retroactive confiscations" (*Metahistory* 363).

16. White explains that "Foucault rejects the authority of both logic and conventional narrative. His discourses often suggest a story, but they are never about the same 'characters,' and the events that comprise them are not linked by laws that would permit us to understand some as causes and others as effects" (*Content* 108).

17. Bruce Robbins has recently suggested that more attention should be paid to continuity rather than discontinuity, and provocatively argues that there is a "hidden antiprogressive continuity that helps explain the relatively smooth transition from an Arnoldian to a Foucaultian regime in Victorian studies and that might also raise some suspicions about the new dispensation" (174–75). In part, the confusion about continuity and discontinuity is encouraged by Foucault. In an interview cited by Robbins, Foucault goes on to claim that "History has no 'meaning,' though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail—but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics" ("Truth and Power" 114). Discontinuity is introduced, not necessarily in the past itself, but by conceptualizing interpretation as struggle.

18. In developing this emphasis on fantasy, I have been significantly influenced by Joan Scott's recent essay, "Fantasy Echo." Scott argues that fantasy echo names "a set of psychic operations by which certain categories of identity are made to elide historical differences and create apparent continuities. . . . It does not presume to know the substance of identity, the resonance of its appeal, or the transformations it has undergone. It presumes only that where there is evidence of what seems enduring and unchanging identity, there is a history that needs to be explored" (304).

19. As Hardy had already written in "Hap" (1866): "Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain, / And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan" (11–12).

20. For an important discussion of Foucault's model of causation, see Copjec 5–14, and below.

21. For this notion of the "extradiscursive" see Lane "Poverty" 453, and on this term's difference from ideological appeals to some prediscursive arena of existence, see Tim Dean's *Beyond Sexuality*, especially his insistence that Lacan terms this "resistance or negation *within* language" the real (18). Finally, for the orthodox Lacanian explanations about why this is not just deconstruction, see Miller "A and a in Clinical Structures" and Žižek *Sublime* 153–58.

22. Copjec mounts her argument against “Foucault”; it’s clear from her description of his argument that she’s discussing mainly *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1.

23. Copjec almost acknowledges this (6–7), arguing that Foucault’s work in the mid-1970s prevents his overall project from succeeding. Christopher Lane’s *Burdens* and “The Experience of the Outside” are indispensable works for anyone considering the relationship among Foucault, Lacan, and Victorian studies.

24. Within literary criticism, the loosely defined movement known as “new historicism” owes a significant debt to Foucault and has profitably urged literary scholars, particularly in Renaissance and Victorian studies, to reconsider the relationship between text and context. Yet practitioners of new historicism have been famously reluctant to explain their theoretical aims, or exactly how new historicism differs from old. Even in a recent articulation, *Practicing New Historicism* (2000), Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt claim the mantle of Johann Gottfried Herder’s cultural analysis:

Poetry [for Herder] is not the path to a transhistorical truth . . . but the key to particular historically embedded social and psychological formations. . . . Herder’s brilliant vision of the mutual embeddedness of art and history underlies our fascination with the possibility of treating all of the written and visual traces of a particular culture as a mutually intelligible network of signs. (7)

Greenblatt and Gallagher here acknowledge how the new historicism leans upon the old, and in such a way that explains how both Foucault and Herder could be among their chief influences: For new historicism, the crucial interpretive gesture is the insistence on reading culture as a “mutually intelligible network of signs,” as a glorious chain of “mutual embeddedness.” Greenblatt and Gallagher actually go farther than conventional Foucauldian analyses in asserting this embeddedness, dismissing critics who argue that art might not be governed entirely by “semantic necessity” (11). This confidence in the efficacy of reference—words are *required* to refer to a meaningful context—is perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of new historicism.

25. The idea of deferred action is notoriously difficult. The most useful introduction is Jean Laplanche’s “Notes on Afterwardsness,” which makes the connection between time and language explicit: deferred action “is inconceivable without a model of translation: that is, it presupposes that something is proposed by other, and which is then *afterwards* retranslated and reinterpreted. . . . It’s impossible therefore just to hold a hermeneutic position on this—that is to say, that everyone interprets their past according to their present—because their past already has something deposited in it that needs to be deciphered” (222).

26. See “Direction” Fink 252 (“La direction” 627).

27. Versions of this argument may be found in “The Natural History of German Life,” in the famous Chapter Seventeen of *Adam Bede* (1859), and in the Prologue to *Felix Holt*.

28. For Shaw, although mimesis is obviously crucial to realism, it is not an end in itself. Instead, he argues, the “narrative apparatus of realism involves us in emotional and cognitive activities that allow us to experience what it would be like to come to grips with the way history moves” (35).

29. In his introduction to *Gulliver's Travels*, Scott explains that “a marked difference between real and fictitious narrative [is] that the latter includes only such incidents as the author conceives will interest the reader, whereas the former is uniformly invested with many petty particulars, which can only be interesting to the narrator himself. Another distinction is, that, in the course of a real story, circumstances occur which lead neither to consequences nor to explanations; whereas the novelist is, generally speaking, cautious to introduce no incident or character which has not some effect in forwarding his plot” (“Jonathan Swift” 157).

30. Alluding to *Adam Bede*, Rosemary Jann helpfully links history and nineteenth-century realism: “The proliferation of quotidian detail authenticated this [shared historical] consciousness as it made the past habitable by imagination. In its ‘faithful representing of commonplace things,’ the Victorian narrative history aimed at asserting the authority of the ordinary in the same way as did many novels of the period” (210).

31. For related critiques of Lukács, see Fleishman 11, and especially Shaw *Forms* 41–46.

32. The expectation that social-problem novels yearn for transparency is of course most influentially articulated in Patrick Brantlinger’s *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832–1867* (1977). Brantlinger shows that what animates Victorian fiction is the idea that “literature is or can be an instrument of social amelioration, at the same time that it is shaped by social events” (27).

33. In *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867*, Catherine Gallagher emphasizes this dilemma: social-problem novelists “take no sly satisfaction in formal reflexivity because their polemical purposes, the same purposes that lead them to question the novel’s form, also lead them to make excessively naïve mimetic claims for it. Even as they probe the contested assumptions of their medium, they try to insist that their fictions are unmediated presentations of social reality” (xii). Gallagher’s formulation leaves unexamined the possibility that there might be a reason to claim mimetic representation as an aesthetic aim, especially when that representation proves impossible to sustain.

34. In this respect, my project owes a large debt to Bodenheimer’s *The Politics of Story*, which conceptualizes the social-problem genre as principally about social fantasy, rather than about social reality as such. Bodenheimer argues that the genre “points to a middle-class crisis of self-definition: insofar as the social-problem novels can be treated as a group, they display conflict about the nature and diversity of a newly empowered and newly fragmented middle class as they attempt to reimagine the roles that it should play in the maintenance of social order” (5).

35. Walter Scott takes this position in a variety of places, including his commentary on Jonathan Swift.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. For instance, in his essay on “Biography” (1832), Carlyle urges contemplation of “how impressive the smallest historical *fact* may become, as contrasted with the grandest *fictitious event*” (54, emp. in original).

2. In *The French Revolution* (1837), Carlyle lists “Nature, Universe, Destiny,

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and Existence” as equally useful names for the “grand unnamable Fact in the midst of which we live and struggle” (13).

3. Mill makes a similar point about *The French Revolution*, arguing that Carlyle makes his readers “acquainted with persons, things, and events, before he suggests to us what to think of them. . . . This done, his logical propositions concerning the thing may be true, or may be false; the thing is there, and any reader may find a totally different set of propositions in it if he can; as he might in the reality, if *that* had been before him” (“Review” 61, emp. in original).

4. The best sustained discussion of Carlyle’s inventive power is Dale, who provides a helpful overview of the relationship between Carlyle’s historiography and German romanticism (*Victorian Critic* 15–88). Bigelow anatomizes Carlyle’s concept of the unconscious, which he borrows from German romanticism. Recently, Vida provides a sustained recent discussion of Carlyle’s early work in light of German thought; the classic reference is Harrold.

5. In recent years, theorists have articulated as a general problem of narrative Macaulay’s difficulty in establishing a secure difference between fictional and historical narrative. For example, White famously explains that “narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes, but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications” (*Content* ix; *Metahistory*’s argument about the “emplotment” of history is also relevant). From White’s perspective, we cannot overlook as simply ornamental the latter half of the phrase “historical narrative”; instead, we must recognize the structuring demands that narrative places on the historical field.

6. As White explains, Carlyle “made of the historical field and the historical process a panorama of happening in which the stress is on the novel and emergent, rather than on the achieved and inherited, aspects of cultural life” (*Metahistory* 149).

7. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar II*: “the object of the human quest is never an object of rediscovery in the sense of reminiscence. The subject doesn’t rediscover the preformed tracks of his natural relation to the external world. The human object always constitutes itself through the intermediary of a first loss. Nothing fruitful takes place in man save through the intermediary of a loss of an object” (*Seminar II* 136/*Le séminaire II* 165). Two things are worth emphasizing here: The first is that the subject does not so much remember the past as recreate it, in part because what the subject remembers is the wrong thing: “In man, it is the wrong form which prevails” (*Seminar II* 86/*Le séminaire II* 109). The second point is that conceptualizing analysis as the restoration of the past is wrongheaded. If the restoration of the original object were even possible, it would spell the death of desire. As Lacan will argue in the seminar on anxiety, “the subject must fail, necessarily, so that its desire is not suffocated” (Harari 99). Every object is a re-found object, but happily, not the original one.

8. For recent overviews of the Macaulay-Carlyle debates, see Isaacson and Sorenson. Isaacson explains that “Macaulay’s expansive, ambitious program for the writing of history provided Carlyle with a convenient foil against which to express his own evolving historiography” (29). Sorenson attributes their differences to rivalry as much as philosophical contention (although he concedes that it is a factor, too), but emphasizes that both “wanted to open up the past to an audience

that had turned away from the privileged discourse of gentlemanly chroniclers to the more visceral language of journalism" (42). For Sorenson, "in *The French Revolution* and [Macaulay's] the *History of England* the press of 'marginalized' life is felt in the style, description, documentation, and interpretation" (42). George Levine's *The Boundaries of Fiction* offers a useful assessment of Carlyle's and Macaulay's achievements in *Sartor* and *History*; he explicitly considers the two in relation to each other on 16–18 and 79–85.

9. G. P. Gooch's *History and the Historians in the Nineteenth Century* narrates the emergence of the Whig version of history, which properly begins with Henry Hallam's *Constitutional History of England from the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of George II* (1827). See Gooch 282–307, especially 292–95. Also see Parker 9–13. For a conservative polemic against the Whig version, see Butterfield.

10. "On History Again" explains that the benefit of historical portraiture is a kind of "inspiration" rather than mimetic representation, and that such portraits "urge [the reader's] mind to complete the picture, and evolve the meaning thereof for itself" (57). And in *Past and Present*, Carlyle argues that it is the "enigmatic" feature that a portrait discloses, rather than certainty (45).

11. Michel Foucault coins the phrase "repressive hypothesis" in his *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I, to describe the hydraulic conceptions of sexuality he attributes to Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. In *History*, see 10–12. The most important discussion of the "repressive hypothesis" is the opening of Christopher Lane's *The Burdens of Intimacy*, especially 3–7. In "Loving Civilization's Discontents," I also address the limits of Foucault's account (172–75).

12. *Historical Sketches* is a posthumous collection of Carlyle's notes that his brother, Alexander Carlyle, published. It comprises the notes and sketches that Thomas Carlyle wrote while researching his biography of Cromwell, which appeared in 1845.

13. In "Signs of the Times" (1829), Carlyle explains that "there is a science of *Dynamics* in man's fortunes and nature, as well as of *Mechanics*. There is a science which treats of, and practically addresses, the primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a truly vital and *infinite* character" (68).

14. In a brilliant and scrupulous reading of Carlyle's *Chartism* (1839), Plotz argues that Carlyle willfully misreads the rational, coordinated mass actions of the Chartists as an outburst of a primal mob mentality. In so doing, Carlyle deprives the Chartists of political agency, substituting in its place an unhistorical aesthetic or psychological "truth" about the need for order (136–48). However, in *The French Revolution* at least, Carlyle stages not only the inarticulateness of the mob, but also how even the most well-thought-out and just political action can misfire, even as it partially accomplishes its aim. And in *Past and Present*, he claims that the Chartists were in fact the most articulate voice in England.

15. The standard, and still invaluable, analysis of Carlyle's rhetorical patterns is Holloway; of most interest in this context is 61–75.

16. Bidney devotes his analysis of archetypal fire imagery to Carlyle's *Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841).

17. Culviner offers the most helpful discussion of heroism in *The French Revolution*; he suggests that the heroic approach may not be the most successful

way to approach this earlier text.

18. Plotz connects Le Bon and Carlyle through the latter's *Chartism* (1839), a work that represents crowds in ways similar to *The French Revolution* (4–5).

Notes to Chapter 2

1. On Dickens's anachronism as an organizing principle rather than a slip, see Tillotson *Novels* 109–15. Peter Ackroyd remarks that “the London of [Dickens's] novels always remains the London of his youth” (100).

2. In writing of an “asymmetrical” relationship between history and experience, I draw on Christopher Lane's “Victorian Asymmetry” (*Burdens* 1–43).

3. Patrick Brantlinger has recently characterized Dickens's ghostly philosophy of history as a “grotesque populism” (61), that is, as a deeply ambivalent populism which manifests its ambivalence by representing the popular as grotesque. Brantlinger's powerful reading does illuminate Dickens's politics more than the familiar claim that the novelist is a sentimental radical. However, I want to argue that Brantlinger overlooks the extent to which, for Dickens, the ghostly and the uncertain are what make history itself possible.

4. Although allegory traditionally implies a one-to-one correspondence between registers of meaning, the proliferation of examples that all mean the same thing indicates that such a model does not apply here. The pressure Paul de Man brings to the concept of allegory is relevant, however. See particularly “Reading and History” (66–67), where de Man also argues that a “dialectic of understanding, as a complex interplay of knowing and not-knowing, is built into the very process of literary history” (58). Although de Man writes of “literary history” in this passage, at other moments in this well-known essay he connects literary-historical practice with history as such.

5. Ackroyd writes that “Dickens suggests that the strongest dreams are those which create a kind of allegory of the world, that dreams are, in that sense, at the root of all fiction” (378–79). While I agree with this claim, it is important to acknowledge that Dickens does not represent these “allegorical” dreams as the “strongest” dreams, but simply as those in which he is willing to concede some relationship between the past and the present.

6. My language here alludes to the Freudian/Lacanian principle of *Nachträglichkeit*, or “deferred action.” As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis explain, “It is not lived experience in general that undergoes a deferred revision, but, specifically, whatever it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate into a meaningful context. The traumatic experience is the epitome of such unassimilated experience” (112). I discuss deferred action at greater length in my Introduction.

7. At least since Steven Marcus's classic essay, “Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History,” critics have been attentive to the interplay between historiography and psychoanalysis. Marcus's powerful reading of the Dora case as a historical narrative should not obscure psychoanalysis's more fundamental opposition to narrative meanings—or, perhaps more precisely, psychoanalysis's interest in the kinds of failures that thwart narrative, although we often defend those narratives to the cost of our well-being.

8. Alenka Zupancic explains this point through the figure of Oedipus, suggest-

ing that the particulars of Oedipus's answer to the Sphinx's riddle are less important than his willingness to risk an answer. The Lacanian inference is that "the subject actually *gives* something—he must give or offer his words; thus he can be *taken at his word*" (203, original emp.).

9. Indeed, this openness to history, rather than the more sober injunction to duty, constitutes his real inheritance from Carlyle; I take up Carlyle's version of history in Chapter 1. Elliot Gilbert provides an excellent discussion of Carlyle's "passionate anachronistic vision," which denies "the view that human history consists of a series of events linked by a superficial causality and that the way to preserve and communicate that history is to present those events as far as possible in the order in which they actually occurred and to look with disdain upon all but logical explanations of the connections therein" (253).

10. For a different reading of secrecy in Dickens, see Miller, especially 192–220. My account is more compatible with Christopher Lane's recent critique of secrecy in contemporary queer theory (224–45, esp. 239–42).

11. Slavoj Žižek's *For They Know Not What They Do* (1991) explains the "catastrophic consequences" of revealing "what should remain unspoken if the existing intersubjective network is to retain its consistency" (11, 12).

12. Standard treatments of anti-Catholic prejudice in Victorian England include Norman; Arnstein; Klaus; and Paz. Monod has a fascinating discussion of Dickens's personal hostility to Catholicism (192). For discussions of the Gordon Riots, see Babington; De Castro; Hibbert; Rudé *Crowd* and *Hanoverian*.

13. Butt and Tillotson explain that "the events of 1836–1841 make the novel almost journalistically apt. The Poor Law riots, the Chartist risings at Devizes, Birmingham, and Sheffield, the mass meetings on Kersal Moor and Kennington Common, and most pointed of all, the Newport rising of 1839 with its attempt to release Chartist prisoners—all these . . . gave special point in 1841 to 'a tale of the Riots of '80'" (82). For additional discussion of the contemporary political significance of *Barnaby*, see Rice "Politics."

14. In "The Time of Interpretation: Psychoanalysis and the Past," I discuss the way psychoanalysis handles the distinction between memory and history proper.

15. Psychoanalytic critics have not failed to emphasize Barnaby's discovery of his father. Lacanian-oriented critics such as Michasiw and Sadoff have tended to read Barnaby as psychotic. While their elucidations of the paternal role, or, more properly, its foreclosure, in paranoia have been useful to me, I am not sure that the Lacanian father—that is, the signifier of maternal desire—is absent from Barnaby. Mrs. Rudge is clearly marked by desire: The desire that Barnaby and his father not meet. That this desire should depend on Barnaby's ignorance of his father does not necessarily mean that the father has been absent.

16. Natalie McKnight, as part of her argument that "Barnaby's history recapitulates the history of the treatment of the insane, as Foucault presents it in *Madness and Civilization*" (90), reads this paragraph as a kind of silencing and punishing of Barnaby. It is, she finds, an attempt to normalize him that is more restrictive than incarceration itself, because it implants within him the values of productivity and hard work. The extent to which Barnaby's story recapitulates Foucault's argument is open to question—Dickens does not, after all, try to turn Barnaby into a bourgeois, or even into a farmer, reporting instead that "his love of freedom and interest in all that moved or grew, or had its being in the elements, remained

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to him unimpaired" (Chapter the Last: 634).

17. The most unequivocally evil characters in *Barnaby*, Sir John Chester and Gashford, are ancillary figures in the novel; moreover, Chester is such a transparent caricature of Lord Chesterfield that Dickens cannot draw upon him in the same way as he does the other main characters. For a full expression of this view, see Saintsbury (qtd. in Hawses' *Barnaby* 675–76). By contrast, Magnet argues that, by attacking Lord Chesterfield so vehemently, Dickens is trying to prop up the cultural role of the superego (84–99).

18. For a useful discussion of the function of these analogies in Scott's historical fiction, see Duncan (222), although he attributes Dickens's revision of Scott to a misreading on the former's part (for a similar argument, see Newman 172). Also see Marcus's seminal account of *Barnaby's* father-son pairs for a useful discussion of analogy, as well as, more generally, Daleksi's account of analogy in Dickens.

19. For the standard discussion of Dickens's ambitions on this score, see Butt and Tillotson.

20. Alison Case explains that Dickens "rejects . . . precisely the qualities which define Scott as a historical novelist: namely, his ability to construct plots and characters as representations of historical process and consciousness" (129). Yet she goes on to assert that "it is the sense of being in the grip of the past, whether historical, personal, or literary, that Dickens most wants to escape in *Barnaby Rudge*," and that "Dickens's treatment of the subject seems to leave no room for any consciousness of the past which is not 'retrogressive'" (141, 42).

21. For example, the novel starts with two histories that are untrue—John Willett's account of Elizabeth staying at the Maypole and cuffing a story, and Solomon Daisy's misleadingly gripping account of the Haredale murder. Likewise, Sim Tappertit, Varden's apprentice, plots a vengeance justified by a bizarre belief in the ancient privileges of apprentices, and the Protestant Association elicits violence through misguided appeals to history.

22. For some critics this instantly disqualifies *Barnaby* as a historical novel: see Lindsay; Butt and Tillotson.

23. McKnight exemplifies such claims, arguing that "Barnaby, Gordon, Hugh, and the mob they lead are all striving to find a voice by lashing out at the surfaces and conventions that have kept them mute and marginalized" (88). This formulation obscures the radically different relationships of Barnaby, Gordon, and Hugh to their mob—including the extent to which they are even aware that they are part of a mob. In addition to McKnight, Lindsay and Hollington also read the novel in these terms. Lindsay claims that "Barnaby and Tappertit . . . make up together what Dickens feels the motive force of the revolt: that which is limited to particular circumstance and the sense of personal wrong, and is treated humorously, satirically, and that which holds the pure human aspiration and is treated poetically, sympathetically" (103). Such readings as Lindsay's and McKnight's miss the "actual formation of an alliance between the two extremist factions, the militant Chartists and the anti-Catholic Ultra-Tories," which is the novel's key political insight into the 1840s (Rice "Politics" 60).

24. This criticism is explicitly formulated by Hollington, who argues that *Rudge* "seeks conservatively to reinstate authority rather than undermine it. . . . It seems Dickens is unwilling or incapable of imagining any freedom from psychic repression" (14). By contrast, John Kucich astutely observes that Dickens is uninterest-

ed in *psychic* repression in his early fiction, including *Rudge*—though he is clearly interested in the ways political repression can produce mob violence (213–14).

25. For a discussion of *Rudge's* ghosts that emphasizes Dickens's view of the imagination rather than historical process, see McMaster 12–13.

26. Near the novel's end, Barnaby comes to resemble his spectral father: "Passive and timid, scared, pale, and wondering, and gazing at the throng as if he were newly risen from the dead, and felt himself a ghost among the living, Barnaby—not Barnaby in the spirit, but in flesh and blood, with pulses, sinews, nerves, and beating heart, and strong affections" (79:711). It is striking that Dickens's vibrant proliferation of bodily tissues, apparently intending to confirm Barnaby's liveness, contradict the list of adjectives at the sentence's beginning. Read temporally, this organization could suggest that Barnaby recovers his physical prowess as he and Gabriel make their way to the latter's house. The tension between the two parts of the sentence also corresponds structurally to the status of the other living ghosts in the novel—his father was pale, ghastly, and terrifyingly alive, for instance. The sentence registers Barnaby's return, but paradoxically his return from life.

27. Duncan notes that Ainsworth and Bulwer-Lytton "undertook what might be called a re-gothicization of the historical romance. . . . suggest[ing] that 'history'—the public affairs of great folks—is a glossy but empty pageantry, and the fiery currents of life flow underground, in populous warrens and secret labyrinths" (213–14). Dickens can be included in this re-gothicization as well, although his ghosts work to very different effect from Ainsworth's.

28. To understand the force of Dickens's vision, it may be helpful to compare it with W. H. Ainsworth's *Guy Fawkes* (1841), an exactly contemporary historical novel also promulgating tolerance for Catholics. In Ainsworth's novel, Guy Fawkes is plagued with supernatural visions—including the ghost of a saint—warning him of certain disaster if he proceeds with his plot. Ainsworth deploys the ghostly to indicate that Fawkes mistakenly acted out of ambition. For a further discussion of the distinctive appeals to the supernatural in Dickens and Ainsworth, see Schroeder 31.

29. For a useful overview of how Derrida's recent turn to "hauntology" can help us read the Victorians, see Julian Wolfreys's *Victorian Hauntings* (and especially, on Dickens, see chapters one and four of this work).

Notes to Chapter 3

1. For criticism of *Shirley* that emphasizes industrial conflict, see Plotz 154–93, and Webb 121–61. E. P. Thompson discusses *Shirley* in his chapter on the Luddites in *The Making of the English Working Class* (472–602).

2. Writing to William Smith Williams, Brontë enthuses that, were she to meet Forçade, her "impulse would be to say, 'Monsieur, you know me, I shall deem it an honour to know you. . . . the subtle-thoughted, keen-eyed, quick-feeling Frenchman, knows the true nature of the ingredients which went to the composition of the creation he analyses—he knows the true nature of things, and he gives them their right name'" (Wise *Lives* III:41). And she confides to Ellen Nussey that Forçade "follows Currer Bell through every winding, discerns every point, discriminates every shade—

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proves himself master of the subject and lord of the aim" (*Lives* III:42).

3. Sally Shuttleworth concisely describes this analogy: "Both the labour and marriage markets are overstocked. Middle-class women and mill workers are alike made redundant, transformed from valued producers into worthless commodities by the operation of economic factors over which they have no control" (*Charlotte Brontë* 184). John Plotz argues that the relationship between women and workers is not analogous, but that the novel shows how middle-class women's flight towards privacy is produced by the threat of the mob.

4. For accounts emphasizing *Shirley's* paternalism, see Bodenheimer; Webb.

5. Wendy Parkins has recently noted the tendency to read *Shirley* as though it were a "transparent allegory" (27), a phrase she borrows from Roland Barthes. Paul Kenny makes a similar argument.

6. See Lane "Charlotte Brontë." My argument in general owes a clear debt to Lane's reading; I shall return to his argument at specific moments below.

7. Sigmund Freud was fond of this story, which he called "kettle logic," using it in both *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900[1899]) and *Jokes in Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). For a related discussion of Moore's apparently inexhaustible list of reasons not to help the workers, see Lane 206–7.

8. For instance, Patrick Brantlinger has recently argued that, because *Shirley* represents the working classes as intelligent, the novel is caught in a double bind: "it is not clear why, assuming that Luddism was not in their interest, the workers should fall prey to the outside agitators. On the other hand, if Luddism was in their interest, and the workers knew this, they wouldn't have needed outsiders to rise them to action" (*Reading* 114). I am trying to suggest that *Shirley's* theory of causation cannot be equated with responsiveness to ideology.

9. Plotz argues that "the real strength of *Shirley*" is "the way it is striving to contain within the confines of the novel a potentially disruptive rival. That rival is the claims for representation that working-class crowds forcefully asserted throughout the 1840s" (171).

10. *The Professor* and *Villette*, in particular, also showcase a different kind of conflicting interpretation, one that tends to mediate between secrecy and the intensification of desire—and even to use repression as a mode of this intensification. This is a fascinating dynamic, but one that proceeds quite afar from this chapter's focus. For a full discussion of this idea, see Kucich 34–113.

11. I discuss this theory of realism, and its evolution from Walter Scott's writings on the novel, in my introduction.

12. In a letter to Williams, Brontë proclaims that "Details, situations which I do not understand and cannot personally inspect, I would not for the world meddle with, lest I should make even a more ridiculous mess of the matter than Mrs. Trollope did in her 'Factory Boy'" (*Wise Lives* II:184).

13. For a superb discussion of *Coriolanus* and antisocial aspects of human nature, see Lane 210–11. Other relevant discussions of the relationship between the play and the novel include Arnold and Patterson.

14. At a crucial moment in her argument, Armstrong misattributes this line to Caroline, and further insists that "Brontë was not being the least bit ironic in having her heroine say this" (217). Had Caroline said this, the scene would indeed take on a disciplinary valence of the sort Armstrong describes.

15. I discuss "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" at greater

length in my introduction.

16. Lane is especially interesting on the surplus violence that the workers voice; see 207–8.

17. Patterson argues that *Shirley* is “a fable of industrial relations that is triply layered in historical retrospect and proceeds by historical analogy, a method to which the frontal presentation of *Coriolanus* is at once the key and the professional statement of intent” (149).

18. Brontë herself had always admired the Duke of Wellington. For a telling recollection from Brontë’s childhood, see Gordon 28.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Eliot’s relationship with positivism is famously complex. For helpful discussions, see Vogeler; Semmel 8–11; and Graver 4–10.

2. Martha Vogeler’s excellent biography of Harrison, *Frederic Harrison: Vocations of a Positivist*, details his involvement with the biography (293–94).

3. For a full consideration of Eliot’s painterly metaphors, see Witemeyer, especially 33–44.

4. Harry Shaw explains that realist novels have never been as interested in so-called representational transparency as its various critics and defenders have alleged. See particularly *Narrating* 38–89.

5. Eliot and Harrison’s exchange is motivated by his reading of *Felix Holt*, suggesting that Eliot’s reference to “pity and terror” is a self-quotation: Many people, she writes, experience “some tragic mark of kinship in the one brief life to the far-stretching life that went before, and to the life that is to come after, such as has raised the pity and terror of men ever since they began to discern between will and destiny” (Introduction: 10).

6. In his most recent novel, *Thinks . . .* (2001), David Lodge revisits the terms of Harrison and Eliot’s debate. In *Thinks . . .*, a cognitive scientist dismissively refers to grief, with its concomitant “excessive” outbursts of affect, as a sign that the “virtual machine” of consciousness is broken. His conversational foil, a novelist whose husband has recently died, refuses to believe that grief is a breakdown at all. In their conversation, the scientist and novelist explicitly raise the distinction between pictures and diagrams, as well (68–69). Connecting Lodge’s novel with the Harrison/Eliot debate suggests that fiction may be motivated by nonrecuperable aspects of experience. In other words, in both cases the novelist’s interest in painful thoughts is not to integrate them into an otherwise uplifting narrative, but to explore how the persistence of those thoughts deforms and even shatters our complacent everyday sense of identity and self-transparency.

7. Ashton sees this passage emerging from Eliot’s reading of Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833) and “the optimistic materialism of [Charles] Bray and [Charles] Hennell” (75). For an extended unfolding of this passage in its relation to Eliot’s career, see Bonaparte *Will. Dale (In Pursuit)* and Shuttleworth (*George Eliot*) establish the broad context of the nineteenth-century birth of scientific empiricism, or “positivism” in that term’s widest sense. Beer’s excellent *Darwin’s Plots* scrutinizes Eliot’s relationship with evolutionary biology. McCaw similarly locates the passage in relation to nineteenth-century British historiography, and in

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“Determinism” Levine establishes Eliot’s intimate familiarity with the relevant philosophical arguments, especially those of Mill.

8. Li puts this argument most generously, arguing that while Eliot accepted the organic metaphor, she saw no need to elevate it into an all-encompassing theory (194). Williams gives the argument a particularly caustic form: Eliot’s position is “that of a Carlyle without the energy, of an Arnold without the quick practical sense, of an anxiously balancing Mill without the intellectual persistence” (108).

9. Amanda Anderson’s recent *The Powers of Distance* (2001) usefully explains that “for Eliot acts of distancing produce a more primary effect, which is psychological: the underdevelopment of the moral faculties, particularly the faculty of sympathy” (11).

10. Eliot recycles this synesthetic image to similar effect in *Adam Bede* (1859), where her narrator says that the “secret of our emotions never lies in the bare object but in its subtle relations to our own past: no wonder the secret escapes the unsympathising observer, who might as well put on his spectacles to discern odours” (200).

11. For an extended discussion of Eliot’s complex invocation of Wordsworth and “the peasant,” see Roazen; also see Pinney “Authority” for a helpful discussion of this passage as evidence of Eliot’s skepticism about progress.

12. For particularly explicit versions of this tendency, see Andres; Rosenberg “George Eliot”; Rosenberg “Historicizing.”

13. Kate Millet makes this point with characteristic pungency: “George Eliot lived the revolution . . . perhaps, but she did not write of it” (139). And it is worth acknowledging that nothing is less like the world of a George Eliot novel than Mary Ann Evans’s escape from being the daughter of a Tory land-agent and her transformation into a great novelist. Her father, Robert Evans, was “suspicious of all forms of ‘enthusiasm,’ took both his politics and his religion from Arbury Hall [estate of the Newdigate family, for whom he served as land-agent], never troubling his head with questions of doctrine” (Haight 8; Ashton 11–16). In this chapter, I am trying to suggest that there are conceptual reasons for Eliot’s approach that cannot be reduced to bad faith or “a little Toryism by the sly” (Eliot “Sad Fortunes” 3–4).

14. Writing of the increasing sense of interconnectedness in the nineteenth century, Eliot states: “Within lives still vigorous there have been changes such as the First Reform Bill & the Repeal of the Corn Laws, which have given a keen experimental sense that public action is also a private affair. And there is the better understanding of disease which makes obedience to general sanitary measures a double education in the ideas of continuity & solidarity” (Pinney “More Leaves” 372). Eliot implicitly concedes here that we cannot *know* whether public events determine private ones, but can only “sense” that they may be related. She defends this position vigorously, though, exclaiming, “As if the question whether personal identity can be proved were more weighty than my experience that what my past self felt & did is affecting my present self.” (Pinney “More Leaves” 370). For Eliot, everything will hinge on this “experience,” and whether or not her characters are capable of taking up a different position with respect to it.

15. Examples of such political criticisms are almost too numerous to mention. For *Felix Holt*, a useful overview of the overwhelmingly negative Marxist and materialist critical response to the text is provided in Perkin 125–38. Well-known

instances of critics lamenting George Eliot's conservatism in *Felix Holt* include Bamber; Brantlinger *Spirit* 230–35 (where Eliot's organicism is assimilated to Spencer's); and Williams *Culture* 102–9. For influential feminist perspectives on Eliot, see Showalter *Literature*, esp. 125–32; Millet 139, 155; Gilbert and Gubar 443–535; Booth 204–35. Booth puts this particularly bluntly: “Eliot . . . openly begs her social questions: Which misogynist is Esther Lyon to marry? Which fate is better for the workers in the short run: brute subjection or brute rebellion?” (205). Staten provides a useful abridgement of and rebuttal to similar criticisms of *Middlemarch*.

16. Oscar Wilde skewers such providentialism in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), as Miss Prism defines fiction for her pupil, Cecily Cardew: “The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means” (II: 341).

17. For a discussion of this passage's origin in George Eliot's astonishment at the inflated rhetoric of the 1830s, see Graver *George Eliot* 289.

18. As Eliot's narrator puts it in *Middlemarch*, “Mortals are easily tempted to pinch the life out of their neighbour's buzzing glory, and think that such killing is no murder” (II: xxi: 205).

19. The key modern critics of Felix as a match include Bamber; Brantlinger *Spirit*; and Gallagher *Industrial*.

20. While Victorian critics denounced Eliot's deferred narrative, modern critics have praised the same tendency. In a formulation I have found immensely helpful, Rosemarie Bodenheimer explains that in *Felix Holt*, “stories . . . reproduce the view of action as anticlimax, revealing a perpetual frustration of anticipated relationships between thought, action, and consequence” (211). Similarly, Robert Caserio finds “an arbitrary relationship between what is done and narrative reasonings about what is done that always threatens to return action to the form of accident. And this constant threat to the significance of action, which in its turn threatens to return meaning itself to the form of accident or mere nomination, is also offered by Eliot as most plausibly representative of ‘the real’” (211).

21. There isn't space enough for a proper consideration of *Daniel Deronda*, which is of course Eliot's most well-developed account of progressive organicism in history. But *Deronda* can be such a novel because it is aspirational, whereas *Holt* and *Middlemarch* are so self-consciously novels of England's past, and thus attempt more seriously to explain the present.

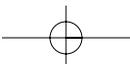
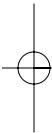
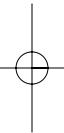
22. Gillian Beer brilliantly connects Eliot's refusal to specify originary moments to the novel's complex array of web imagery (153–65). J. Hillis Miller's influential essay, “Narrative and History,” also argues that the narrative is not organized around beginnings or endings.

23. I am not seriously suggesting that Brooke or Casaubon represents tendencies in organicist thinking, of course—only that they are clear, and when played against one another, comic demonstrations of error in historical thinking.

24. It is interesting to note here that in Eliot's manuscript, the “Prelude” is contained within Volume I, “Miss Brooke.” Such a bibliographic detail can only be suggestive, rather than definitive, but it may buttress my point that the narrator of the “Prelude” is voicing Dorothea's fantasies, rather than her own. For a discussion of the manuscript, see Beaty *Middlemarch*.

Notes to Epilogue

1. For “gnomic propositions,” and Lacan’s self-conscious manipulation of aphorism, see *Seminar VII* (129).
2. Nor has time disproved Jameson’s witticism that “the only people still seriously interested in [Freudian criticism] are the Freudians themselves” (*Political* 65).



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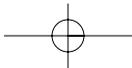
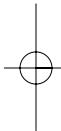
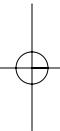
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