

## THE REDEMPTIVE PAST IN THE NEO-VICTORIAN NOVEL

DANA SHILLER

Over the last decade a number of novels have displayed a various and intriguing range of historical commitments. Although I will not attempt to take on the whole range here, I do want to explore a subset of the historical novel I think I can clearly delineate, or at least two exemplars of this subset. I call this particular category the neo-Victorian novel, and I read it as at once characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel.<sup>1</sup> In order to develop my own argument, I will make rather free use of Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodernism, particularly his critique of postmodern representations of history.

In his attacks on postmodernism, Jameson has decried its supplanting of the redemptive project of history with "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past,"<sup>2</sup> an approach he finds problematic because if one's relation to the past is a matter of randomly retrieving various "styles," then one loses the impetus to find out what actually happened in that past. As a Marxist critic for whom the purpose of history is "the resurrection of the dead of anonymous and silenced generations, the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future" (*CL*, p. 18), Jameson finds in postmodern historicity an ever-widening gap between the actual lived past and its representation. According to Jameson, postmodern skepticism regarding how much we can really know about the past has resulted in nostalgia for the "look" of the past without significant interest in its substance.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the past as historical referent is dissolved in self-reflexive textuality: "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (*CL*, p. 18). Jameson acknowledges that history is an "absent cause" that is never completely representable, and yet he insists that "History is not in any sense itself a text or master text or master narrative, but that it is inaccessible to us except in textual or narrative form, or in other words, that we approach it only by way of some prior textualization

or narrative (re)construction."<sup>4</sup> Jameson is concerned that the postmodern preoccupation with history-as-text has shifted attention away from the actual events of the past, toward the interpretation of those events.

What appears to disturb Jameson most about postmodern representations of the past, be they fictional, filmic, or architectural, is that they strip away its specific political content to focus on its aesthetics. Instead of respecting the radical difference of bygone eras, postmodernism projects onto them contemporary culture, fabricating a "privatized," or subjective, history denuded of its specific cultural resonance.<sup>5</sup> Epitomizing this kind of historicism for Jameson is a film like *Body Heat*, which stylistically "connotes" 1940s *film noir* through the language of nostalgia, but is actually set in 1980s Florida (*CL*, p. 19). The past, according to this cultural logic, becomes a treasure trove to be mined for pertinent connections and similarities to our postmodern world, an approach that for Jameson creates a false continuity between past and present. Jameson argues that using history responsibly means reading it for traces of the "uninterrupted narrative" of class struggle, and bringing to the surface of the text this "repressed and buried reality" (*PU*, p. 20). In effect, he sees past and present as having continuity only insofar as they can be united in a Marxist interpretive framework, which he claims is uniquely qualified to evade the "double bind" of antiquarianism and the postmodern tendency to project contemporary relevance onto history (*PU*, p. 19). The former posits an artificial rupture between past and present; the latter creates a false connection.

In his well-known indictment of E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Jameson claims that the historical novel can no longer represent the historical past, but can only represent our ideas and stereotypes about that past (*CL*, p. 25). He argues that *Ragtime*'s postmodern aesthetics work to negate Doctorow's leftist politics: by commingling real and fictional characters, and by assuming an essentially nonrepresentational style, the novelist ends up with a text that ultimately fails to engage with the "left doxa" it tries to express. Although the novel makes claims on realism, its style functions to keep the past at a distance, so that 1920s New York is replaced by popular images and simulacra of that time and place (*CL*, p. 25). Rather than restoring to us "the essential *mystery* of the cultural past, which . . . is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver, its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it" (*PU*, p. 19), we have the historical novel as postmodern artifact, a monument to the waning of content and the primacy of the image. Again, Jameson's concern is that once we have reduced history to a collection of glossy images sundered from their real-life roots, we have deprived the past of its capacity to transform our collective future.

I want to argue in this essay that neo-Victorian fiction addresses many of Jameson's concerns by presenting a historicity that is indeed concerned with

recuperating the substance of bygone eras, and not merely their styles. These historical novels take a revisionist approach to the past, borrowing from postmodern historiography to explore how present circumstances shape historical narrative, and yet they are also indebted to earlier cultural attitudes toward history. It is my concern in this essay to discuss two novels I will call neo-Victorian: A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton*. Both novels are partly set in the nineteenth century, and while Byatt's historical imagination is perceptibly closer to George Eliot's in *Middlemarch*, Ackroyd also manages to create a postmodern novel that plays on (and with) our certainties about history while simultaneously delighting in what *can* be retrieved of the past.

George Eliot articulated a view of significant history as fundamentally quotidian, a series of private moments and undocumented acts not coincidentally of a sort that many nineteenth-century novels were concerned to render. Although she was among the first to theorize narrative in such a vein as essentially historical, it is clear from the novel's development into the middle decades of the century that novelists and readers alike were increasingly interested in the sense of character and emplotment Eliot fostered. What the neo-Victorian novels do with history is closely connected to both Eliot's sense of history and that of the postmodern historiographers whose work appreciates the fluidity of a historical record that is perpetually open to reinterpretation and therefore constantly assuming different permutations.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, all three of these versions of history share some common ground with Jameson. The fact that neo-Victorian novels employ Eliot's sense of history as a referent, and that this sense of history is in many ways consonant with Jameson's own, serves to complicate Jameson's argument by suggesting that his historical purposes can indeed be achieved in postmodern fictions, although his purposes must be qualified in the process.<sup>7</sup>

In postmodern historiography, the historical record is in itself understood as a text always already processed into narrative, and not merely "an unimpeded sequence of raw empirical realities."<sup>8</sup> Like other historiographic metafiction, neo-Victorian novels are acutely aware of both history and fiction as human constructs, and use this awareness to rethink the forms and contents of the past.<sup>9</sup> Such novels repudiate the traditional boundaries between historical fact and fiction, showing them to be interrelated in their dependence on what Hayden White calls "emplotment" and in their hyperconsciousness of their own tenuous relation to the "truth."<sup>10</sup> Dominick LaCapra's recursive model of history, in which the historian's understanding of the past is continually augmented and revised by present knowledge, offers a useful template for reading both neo-Victorian fiction and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. LaCapra's contention that "the narratives of historians may be opened to some extent by the attempt to explore alternative possibilities in the past that are themselves suggested by the retrospective or deferred effects of

later knowledge”<sup>11</sup> describes effectively Dorothea Brooke’s reinterpretation of her personal history, Byatt’s academics’ revision of the Victorian literary past, and Charles Wychwood’s radical reimaginings of the life of Thomas Chatterton. LaCapra’s historiographical model might seem dangerous to Jameson, since using present knowledge to explore alternative possibilities in history appears inherently unfaithful to any concept of the “historical record.” However, what would seem initially to be opposite arguments begin to look more consistent when the connections between LaCapra, Byatt, Ackroyd and Eliot become more apparent, and when it becomes clear that the neo-Victorian novels rely on both “new” historiography and Eliot to achieve recursively postmodern historical imaginations while maintaining a sense of a referent.

I argue in this essay that neo-Victorian fiction is motivated by an essentially revisionist impulse to reconstruct the past by questioning the certitude of our historical knowledge, and yet I want also to claim that even as these novels emphasize events that are usually left out of histories, they nonetheless manage to preserve and celebrate the Victorian past. In their invocation of a specifically Victorian referent, Byatt’s and Ackroyd’s novels refute Fredric Jameson’s contention that postmodern historicity works to widen the gap between representations of the past and their specific historical referents. *Possession* and *Chatterton* preserve the past while always underscoring that we can never know it prior to its transformation into narrative. Each novel, in its own way, demonstrates that acknowledging that we can only know the past through its textual traces does not mean that historical events are irretrievable, or not worth retrieving. Indeed, both Byatt and Ackroyd suggest that although historical rigor may take on new meaning, it continues to have value, and remains compatible with approaches to history that accept the existence of many possible narratives for any given set of historical facts. In this essay, I will demonstrate that neo-Victorian fiction explores the ground between writing as though there are no persisting truths, a way of thinking that gives the author tremendous latitude in reconstructing the past, and writing as though there is indeed a recoverable past, however attenuated.

### I. Neo-Victorian Fiction and *Middlemarch*

I will begin with a reading of *Middlemarch* in order to establish that the version of history Jameson deplores is not a peculiarly postmodern one, but is one that can be seen as an extension of the historicism practiced by George Eliot—a historicism with which Jameson, moreover, can be said to have affinities. *Middlemarch* is a foundational text for my argument because it is an historical novel that explicitly deconstructs the assumptions of traditional history and the assumptions of realist fiction in a way that is highly consistent with the project of neo-Victorian fiction.<sup>11</sup> Although Eliot’s novel corresponds closely to Avrom Fleishman’s definition of the historical novel as an imaginative portrayal of history that conveys “the *sentiment de l’existence*, the

feeling of how it was to be alive in another age,"<sup>12</sup> on other points the 1872 novel diverges sharply from Fleishman's theory. Eliot's sense of "truth" is not solely dependent on historical fact, the details of the public record, as Fleishman's definition suggests, but rather on the relationship of the course of human events to the seemingly trivial private actions that drive them. *Middlemarch* counters Fleishman's contention that historical fiction "[lifts] the contemplation of the past above both the present and the past, to see it in its universal character"<sup>13</sup> by insisting that history can never be so easily disengaged from either past or present. For Eliot, there is no "universal" past, but a past that continually changes shape based on individual perspective. History, in *Middlemarch*, maintains a fidelity to documented events (for example, in Eliot's chronicling of the local political agitations leading up to the first Reform Bill), but Eliot's true focus is on those unhistorical acts that shape the public record in subtle and usually unnoticed ways.

Tertius Lydgate is not alone in his faulty assumption that one's life does not really count unless one garners fame in the public domain. His sense of history as a process of which one can only aspire to become a part is shared by Dorothea Brooke, who yearns for Saint Theresa's epic life, but is bound by her class and gender to a life of privilege that makes little use of her talents. Dorothea's motivation for marrying Casaubon is twofold: she wants to be of use, and she imagines that in becoming the wife of an historian, she will be able vicariously to connect herself to the past: "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!"<sup>14</sup> But the weight of history turns out to be suffocating in more ways than one: on her wedding-journey to Rome, she feels oppressed by the ancient ruins, which to Dorothea symbolize millennia of idolatrous decadence.

The ruins of Rome come to symbolize on a grander scale the alienation from traditional history Dorothea experiences within her marriage. Her Roman holiday signifies a subtle shift in her psyche, away from a fascination with the "truths" available through a scholarly approach to history, towards a sensitivity to history's more personal resonances (p. 225). Dorothea would be less unhappy in her marriage, the narrator suggests, if only Casaubon "listened with the delight of tenderness and understanding to all the little histories which made up her experience, and would have given her the same sort of intimacy in return, so that the past life of each could be included in their mutual knowledge and affection" (p. 230). To Casaubon, his wife's "little histories" pale next to his *Key to all Mythologies*, and yet Eliot represents his version of history as cobwebby and soulless. When Dorothea recognizes that Casaubon's "years full of knowledge seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or sympathy" (p. 229), she enacts the novel's supplanting of Casaubon's totalizing "History" with its lower-case counterpart, a move which stresses the importance of the personal past.

A crucial movement in *Middlemarch*, then, is the progression from Dorothea's and Lydgate's misconception that history takes place on a higher plane than the mere lives of men and women, to their mutual recognition that history is shaped on a far more local, personal level than they had previously imagined. Hayden White argues that Eliot uses the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon, and particularly their disastrous Roman honeymoon, to hand down an indictment of antiquarianism.<sup>15</sup> According to White, Dorothea's Roman revelations and her eventual marriage to Will Ladislaw signify "her escape from the incubus of history,"<sup>16</sup> yet I have shown that discovering the mummified nature of Casaubon's studies permits Dorothea to forge a sense of the past as personal history. Rather than casting off history for Art (as White claims Dorothea does by marrying Ladislaw), Dorothea's marriage to Ladislaw more precisely weds history and art, providing a fitting capstone for Dorothea's growing conviction that history includes an understanding of the way individual lives unfold and how the progress of one life influences the direction of others.

Lydgate's tragedy is that he does not learn this lesson: although his life is shown to be a success by most men's standards, in his own eyes he is a failure who allowed his ambitions to be thwarted by the constraints of his personal life because he could not see how closely his public and private lives were linked. Dorothea also lives out her life feeling that there was something better which she might have done, but the novel is gentler in its judgment of her. In the Finale's most famous passage, Eliot calls Dorothea's acts "unhistoric" (p. 896), yet we are meant to see that despite the historical and cultural limitations that divert Dorothea's ardor into minor channels, her "hidden life" resonates in subsequent generations in a way that, even though it has been unremarked, richly complicates the traditional notion of history.

Eliot's representation of the past as acquiring meaning only through interpretation gives rise to a text replete with what LaCapra has called "intense moments of inner difference and self-contestation—moments that engage the reader in self-questioning that has a bearing on the present and future."<sup>17</sup> If we take Dorothea as a reader of her own experience, then the moment in which she learns of Casaubon's perverse codicil and revises her understanding of her past accordingly is particularly noteworthy. Dorothea realizes that as a result of her new knowledge, "everything was changing its aspect: her husband's conduct, her own duteous feeling towards him, every struggle between them—and yet more, her whole relation to Will Ladislaw" (p. 532). What LaCapra describes as the "retrospective . . . effects of later knowledge" suggest entirely new interpretive possibilities for Dorothea's marriage, and cause her to rethink completely her past.

Like Dorothea, Bulstrode comes to see the past as eminently dynamic, as it rises into his "second life" like an unchecked flood. When blackmail forces him to acknowledge long-ago misdeeds, the banker must revise his identity as

a pious Christian who has exonerated himself by exalting God, and he must accept that in involving himself with a shady business, deceiving a woman into marrying him and putting all her assets in his name, and disinheriting her daughter, he has sinned in what he sees as irredeemable ways. Bulstrode understands from the start that what will ruin him is not only his denial of his own past, but the opening of that past to the scrutiny of his fellow Middlemarchers, who will doubtlessly interpret events differently. Recalling his tacit decision to keep Sarah Dunkirk's whereabouts hidden, thereby guaranteeing himself her mother's property, Bulstrode compels himself to look squarely at the truth: he had known where the daughter was, he had paid Raffles to keep her location secret, and he had profited enormously from this deception. This, Bulstrode realizes, is the "bare fact" that he is now forced to see in "the rigid outline with which acts present themselves to onlookers," an entirely different form from his personal memory, in which "the fact was broken into little sequences, each justified as it came by reasonings which seemed to prove it righteous" (p. 666).

The past, in *Middlemarch*, pervades the present and irrevocably shapes it, just as the present shapes the interpretation of the past. Nevertheless, this fluidity of temporalities that Eliot describes does not efface the historical referent as much as Jameson might fear. Bulstrode's story extends Dorothea's recognition of the recursive operation in which the present sheds new light on past events, by showing how completely open to reinterpretation is anyone's past. Eliot's sense of history as contingent on interpretation, and as composed of private, undocumented acts presages the view of history in which neo-Victorian novels are grounded. However, Eliot's historicism is grounded in certain incontrovertible truths. The "bare facts" of Bulstrode's deception exist, and he is forced to acknowledge them. These facts persist throughout their reinterpretations by both Bulstrode and his fellow townspeople, even though what Eliot calls our attention to are the ways in which these facts are perceived. History, for Eliot, most certainly resurrects the dead: Bulstrode's secret past is unearthed, and her depiction of Dorothea's superficially "unhistoric" life brings to light the history of a woman who (even if she were an actual personage) would not figure in conventional histories. Moreover, the discovery of Bulstrode's long-hidden crime transforms Bulstrode and the rest of Middlemarch. The banker's crime is personal, rather than structural, but nonetheless its revelation does resurrect the past for the redemption of future generations.

## II. Reinventing the Victorians (not effacing them)

Jameson would doubtlessly condemn neo-Victorian texts as participants in postmodernism's "nostalgia mode," in which the absent past is appropriated and refracted through the ideology of the present, in order to create glossy images of "pastness" through the attributes of fashion—as *American Graffiti's*

poodle skirts signified a lamentation for the Eisenhower years. For Jameson, pastiche has superseded parody as the dominant discourse of imitation, and he finds the replacement discouraging, arguing that pastiche mimics styles without allowing the referent to reassert itself. Consequently, the imitation eclipses the original, which itself then becomes “one more idiolect among many” (*CL*, p. 17). I wish to contend, however, that neo-Victorian fiction evades easy classification as pastiche due to its careful reconstruction of the Victorian past. The refraction of the past through the present is unavoidable; this makes it even more important to exert ourselves in order to recover the historical referent.

I find particularly useful in this context Linda Hutcheon’s discussion of John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, in which she argues that postmodern historical fiction can indeed take a redemptive view of the past. Hutcheon claims that Fowles’ extended parody of a number of Victorian novels is “not just a game for the academic reader, [but] overtly intended to prevent any reader from ignoring both the modern and the specifically Victorian social, as well as aesthetic, contexts.”<sup>18</sup> For Hutcheon, Fowles’ parody is inseparable from its Victorian context, which is then placed in a relation to the present. Even though the plot structure of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* marks it as modern, Hutcheon argues that the novel

requires that historical context in order to interrogate the present (as well as the past) through its critical irony. Parodic self-reflexiveness paradoxically leads here to the possibility of a literature which, while asserting its modernist autonomy as art, also manages simultaneously to investigate its intricate and intimate relations with the social world in which it is written and read.<sup>19</sup>

Hutcheon’s argument demonstrates that contemporary historical novels can explore the past in ways more substantive than merely appropriating its fashions. The self-reflexiveness so characteristic of postmodernist texts does not, in Hutcheon’s view, prevent Fowles’ novel from being intimately concerned with its specifically Victorian social context. Hutcheon’s redefinition of parody to include an ironic distance creates space for an intertextual postmodern novel to be at once self-reflexive and historical. Her remark that the past has been “lost or at least displaced, only to be reinstated as the referent of language, the relic or trace of the real”<sup>20</sup> helps to delineate the project of neo-Victorian fiction by suggesting that the “relic” of the real is crucial in that it is the sole existing marker of bygone events. Hutcheon’s argument is perhaps the most obvious critique/amplification of Jameson, but I find the lines of argument afforded by *Possession* and *Chatterton* to be even richer in implications.

Neo-Victorian fiction, then, is not simply a pastiche of popular mental images of Victoriana: corsets, overstuffed furniture, and highly polished



silverware designed to satisfy contemporary nostalgia for a more opulent look. The texts I treat in this essay emphasize the textualization of the past, demonstrating the great extent to which the late twentieth-century sense of "Victorianism" comes to us already emplotted by the nineteenth-century novel. Hutcheon's notion of "textual traces" suggests that we have always known the past through narrative, and indeed that both narrativized history and fiction invariably reshape the past in the light of present issues—the very process that historiographic metafiction calls to our attention.<sup>21</sup> However, neo-Victorian novels show that having acknowledged that the past is textual, and that history is always shaped by present concerns, it is still possible to recapture that past in ways that evoke its spirit and do honor to the dead and silenced.

### III. *Possession*: "A history of falsehoods is not the same as false history"

Near the end of *Possession*, Roland Michell's and Maud Bailey's quest has turned to resolving the fate of the illegitimate child of Victorian poets Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. This quest culminates in the discovery of LaMotte's final letter to Ash, in which she fills in the blank of the twenty-eight years since their brief love affair. "All History is hard facts—and something else—passion and colour, lent by men," she writes, offering to tell him "at least—the facts."<sup>22</sup> The facts Christabel relates, though—that their daughter was born in a Brittany convent, and taken to England, where she was raised by Christabel's sister as her own—turn out to be all but inseparable from their narrative framework. Like Roland, Christabel is aware that she has shaped the history she narrates, by denying herself the closure of revealing to Maia her true origins:

You will think—if the shock of what I have had to tell you has left you any power to care or to think about my narrow world—that a *romancer* such as I (or a true dramatist such as you) would not be able to keep such a secret for nigh on thirty years (think, Randolph, thirty years) without bringing about some *peripeteia*, some *denouement*, some secret or open scene of revelation. Ah, but if you were here, you would see how I dare not. For her sake, for she is so happy. For mine, in that I fear the possible horror in her fair eyes. If I told her—that—and she stepped back? (P. 545)

Christabel's narrative is deprived of a denouement in more ways than one: sent under cover to Randolph's wife while he lies on his deathbed, the letter never reaches its intended reader. Ellen Ash keeps it from her husband, deciding instead to bury it, unopened, with his body. One hundred years later, Maud Bailey, Maia's great-great-granddaughter, reads the exhumed letter aloud to her fellow literary detectives. It is this reading, and our reading of this reading, which provide the culmination of Christabel's narrative. A typically neat Victorian ending (Randolph dies, clutching the letter to his breast) is

evaded through a quintessentially postmodern lacuna: Randolph never reads the letter, but Maud, Roland and their cohorts do, and it augments (and changes irrevocably) their versions of the life stories of Randolph and Christabel.

*Possession's* postscript, in which Randolph meets his daughter and weaves her a daisy chain in exchange for a lock of her hair, calls attention to what is left out of histories. In a passage hauntingly reminiscent of George Eliot's final assessment of Dorothea's life, the omniscient narrator of *Possession* points out that "there are things that happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken of or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been" (p. 552). Certain things, Byatt tells us, may go un-narrated, but they do have effects. Meeting Maia must surely have changed Randolph's life. Yet although the message Randolph gives his daughter to pass on to her "aunt" is promptly forgotten and, like Christabel's letter to Randolph, never reaches its destination, the meeting of Randolph and Maia *is* written of, after all: Byatt invents a "discernible trace" when she includes the episode in her novel.

By modeling the way their histories are composed of events granted meaning over time, with each new discovery altering their sense of who these poets were, Roland's and Maud's revisions of the lives of Ash and LaMotte offer a literary analogue to LaCapra's observation that historical narratives may be opened by the attempt to explore alternative possibilities in the past: possibilities suggested by present knowledge. The knowledge Byatt's academics "possess" may be partial—they never learn with the reader that Randolph did meet his daughter—but the histories of these two poets do open up for them in profound ways that reveal, in LaCapra's words, "how the past is not simply a finished story to be narrated but a process linked to each historian's time of narration" (p. 18).

*Possession* calls into question how completely we can ever "know" the past from its textual traces. Byatt's novel is full of mysteries that resist the very notion of solution, while it illuminates (and pokes fun at) the insatiable curiosity of her scholar-detectives, who come to learn that collecting the artifacts of dead poets and scrutinizing their marginalia does not in itself produce knowledge and that attention must be paid to what has been left out of the standard biographies. The text contains a struggle between two tensions: the desire for knowledge, which Roland describes as a "violent emotion of curiosity. . . more fundamental even than sex" (p. 92, ellipsis Byatt's), and the resistance offered by what the old-fashioned feminist critic Beatrice Nest comes to understand as "the mystery of privacy" (p. 129). Although Beatrice reminds Maud that "We were not taught to do scholarship primarily by what was omitted" (p. 241), it occurs to her that Ellen Ash's journal is curiously flat and uninteresting precisely because Ellen is hiding something. There are things she doesn't want future readers to uncover about her marriage, things she is herself loath to confront. Ellen Ash's sense of "the unspoken truths of

things" (p. 497) comes from her favorite passage in Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, in which he notes that certain crystalline formations may appear totally distinct from every substance familiar to us, but are actually the effects of causes even now in action beneath the earth. What is important about these rocks, for both Lyell and Ellen, is that they are not primeval relics, but rather part of "the living language of nature, which we cannot learn by our daily intercourse with what passes on the habitable surface" (p. 497). In short, to understand the geological formations that surround us in the present, we must learn to appreciate the ongoing subterranean processes that have both formed and modified them over time.

Ellen's affection for the passage from Lyell echoes in one of *Possession's* recurrent themes: the way the mundane texture of daily life is fabricated from cataclysmic events that are themselves barely acknowledged, let alone documented. Much as the passions that drive Dorothea Brooke are channeled into an unhistoric life, Ellen Ash's existence is shaped by experiences she is unable to represent (even to herself) in words. When Ellen says "I keep faith with the fire and the crystals," she is recognizing her everyday life as the smooth surface beneath which crystals have formed in "intense heat." Under the polished facade of her long marriage smolder two secrets: that she and Randolph have never consummated their love, and that Randolph once had an affair with another woman. Paradoxically, the only way we as readers understand how "carefully strained" (p. 501) the truths in Ellen Ash's journal are is that Byatt gives us entry into Ellen's innermost thoughts, as if only by knowing the "real" truth can we see how much of it is habitually hidden.

*Possession* consistently works to undermine its characters' assumption that given access to enough documents, the scholar can attain complete knowledge of his or her subject. When Ash's biographer Mortimer Cropper bemoans Ellen Ash's "prudery" in refusing to publish some of her husband's private papers, he assumes that if Ellen hadn't buried a box of her most precious mementoes with her husband, Cropper himself might have known the whole truth about Randolph. Regretting that at Ellen's burial in 1896 no one saw fit to open the box, Cropper writes, "Such decisions to destroy, to hide, the records of an exemplary life are made in the heat of life, or more often in the grip of immediate *post-mortem* despair, and have little to do with the measured judgment, and desire for full and calm knowledge, which succeed these perturbations" (p. 484). Cropper errs here in assuming, first, that Ash's "exemplary" life would have contained nothing worth concealing; and second, that "full and calm knowledge" is attainable through a complete set of records, since historical documents are frequently themselves incomplete, a fact to which *Possession* amply attests.

Cropper's belief in the rewards of exhaustive scholarly research, which for him consist in the painstaking accumulation and inventory of Ash's personal relics, repeatedly comes up against the novel's many silences. "It was

all a question of silence," Ellen murmurs to herself the night after her husband's death, and it is clear that she refers both to the memory of a forty-four-year intimacy that did not require many words, and to the power of what went unspoken between herself and Randolph, herself and Christabel, and between Randolph and Christabel. Although the clandestine romance at the heart of *Possession* is neither undiscovered nor undocumented, what remains unsaid about it has more resonance than what is uttered. Having read Christabel's letter asking her forgiveness, Ellen composes numerous replies in her head, but writes nothing. "You must understand that I have *always known*," one of her imagined responses begins, "that my husband told me, long ago, freely and truthfully, of his feelings for you" (p. 491), and although Ellen is aware that writing *that* would be uttering the truth, she also despairs of language's capacity for "[conveying] the truth of the way it had been, of the silence in the telling, the silences that extended before and after it, always the silences" (p. 492).

What Ellen cannot relate is the complicity of silence between herself and her husband even during his admission of guilt. Although Randolph does indeed tell her that he was "not alone" on his trip to Yorkshire, and that his affair with Christabel had been like "a possession, as by daemons" (p. 492), what marks the conversation for Ellen is both his refusal to explain (he says "I cannot explain, Ellen, but I can tell you—") and her own refusal of even this offer to "tell." Now, preparing to bury Randolph, Ellen realizes that in refusing to discuss his affair, she had chosen not to know the truth, and in her reluctance to acknowledge the core of her husband's emotional life she had (with his tacit compliance) built her life around a lie. In this case, the evasion had been easier for Ellen than the truth, as it was with the other significant falsehood of her marriage: that, as she had assured her sisters, she and Randolph had been "unlucky" in trying to have children. The truth, that her terror had prevented them from engaging in sexual intercourse, was unspeakable even to herself.

Robert Kiely describes a similarly systematic obfuscation of the truth in his reading of the ways history is represented in contemporary American novels by minority women writers. In his study of novels by Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, and Louise Erdrich, Kiely notes that

Within the Chinese emigrant context, as in the African American and Indian context, 'getting things straight' and 'naming the unspeakable' form a seemingly admirable and yet potentially destructive project. For though sorting out mistakes and confusions, and clarifying ambiguities, may make for a rational and coherent narrative, they also risk reenacting the dominant habits of oppression and neglect that caused, or at least fueled, covert and 'devious' practices in the first place.<sup>23</sup>

The comparison between the fictions of Hong Kingston, Morrison, and Erdrich and *Possession* may seem farfetched, and I do not mean to suggest that

the “dominant habits of oppression” are the same for minority American women as for the Victorians. But I do want to claim that contemporary historical novels by minority women writers and neo-Victorian novels share a commitment to enacting ambiguities and confusions rather than clarifying them, and that this strategy enables both genres to come at history in a way that is recognizably postmodern, but also deeply interested. Although the emphasis in *Possession* is on the difficulty of uncovering the truth, rather than the nature of the truth, there is always some kind of truth to uncover. In Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator tells the story of a nameless aunt who gave birth to a child out of wedlock and drowned herself and her baby in a well, and whose memory and name were consequently eradicated by her family. The difficulty of ever recovering her aunt’s identity is compounded by the Chinese custom of concealing everyone’s real name.<sup>24</sup> Kiely comments suggestively that “there is a sense in which ‘No Name Woman’ is the right name for the disgraced aunt and in which the ‘false’ name of the sojourner is the only available substitute—distracting metaphor though it may be—for unspoken reality. A history of falsehoods is not the same as false history.”<sup>25</sup> Byatt’s evocation of the relationship between Randolph and Ellen Ash is also “a history of falsehoods” which is not a false history: the ellipses and lacunae of their letters and conversations perform the truth of their marriage rather than conceal it.

*Possession* starts from George Eliot’s eminently recursive sense of how we know the past, then extends it to demonstrate history’s capacity to provide only a partial rendition of the past, simply because most lives are not open books, and traditional histories have no way of documenting secrets. Randolph writes to his wife from Yorkshire that “We are a Faustian generation, my dear—we seek to know what we are maybe not designed (if we are designed) to be able to know,” and while his comment refers explicitly to the Victorian passion for natural history, its subtext emanates from Randolph’s subterfuge, since at the time, Ellen does not know her husband is scrambling over the rocks with another woman. Yet Randolph’s words also serve as an abbreviated version of the novel’s point: that the desire for knowledge must constantly come up against the limits of the human capacity for interpretation.

*Possession* underscores the difficulty of interpreting a life: how does one translate into language things one’s subject will not admit to him- or herself? When Ellen burns the letter Randolph wrote to Christabel and never sent, we are meant to acknowledge the irreparable loss of such a revealing document, but also to see the necessarily incomplete and arbitrary nature of the textual traces *everyone* leaves as itself a representation of their life, with its attendant consequences for the projects of biography and history. To return momentarily to Jameson, I would like to point out that although this instance in the novel shows that the historical record is always partial, it certainly points to a referent—what “truly” happened, which if we cannot retrieve wholesale we

may nonetheless glimpse in fragments, like Randolph's cryptic notes to Ellen. I am not arguing that the discoveries Roland and Maud make about the lives of Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte (or, as we will see in the next section, Charles Wychwood's investigations into the life of Chatterton) constitute the sort of regard for history that would mollify Fredric Jameson. Byatt's characters are, after all, fictional, and the "facts" they unearth are not what Jameson would call actual historical referents. What remains impossible to overlook, however, is Roland and Maud's drive to uncover the truth of Randolph and Christabel's relationship, a passion that suggests the sort of commitment to a referent that might allow for historical redemption.

Kiely describes the methodology of the postmodern historical novelists he considers as "a continual reaching back, in which believing and caring are inseparable from curiosity,"<sup>26</sup> and this kind of "reaching back" into the past is evident in Byatt's novel. In addition, Byatt takes pains to create in *Possession* a texture that is historically faithful. Even if, like the fictive Jewish family in *Ragtime*, Randolph and Christabel are not actual Victorian writers, they are obviously composites of real Victorians, possessing as they do recognizable traits of Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as the American Victorian Emily Dickinson. Antecedents aside, Byatt's obvious appreciation for the ways her characters' Victorian mores enriched their love affair (compared to the relatively sterile "romance" of Roland and Maud) emanates from her ability to differentiate between the two historical periods *Possession* treats—a strategy of which Jameson would unquestionably approve. And, of course, one cannot overlook Byatt's brilliant imitations of Victorian poetry and love letters, which contribute to her reconstruction of the nineteenth-century literary milieu. If it is impossible to separate completely historical narration from the politics of the present, it is still possible to view past eras as distinct from our own. Such distinctions are precisely what make Byatt's novel intimately concerned with the Victorian past: the nineteenth century, for her, is never simply contemporary people dressed in Victorian attire, but a recognizably different world—albeit with some similarities to the present.

*Possession* foregrounds the necessity (and pleasure) of imagining the way the Victorians saw the world via fiction as a way of knowing. Rather than mockingly negating the standard academic enterprise of recapturing literary and historical periods, Byatt appears more interested in showing that even though we cannot accurately reproduce the past, there is much to be gained by trying, and a great deal to be learned and enjoyed from the traces we can decipher. Narrative, in the end, paves over the gaps and creates plausibility, which for the historian and biographer is the best that can be hoped for. For example, Randolph and Christabel's trip to Yorkshire is Byatt's imagined version of what might have happened, based on the scanty documentary evidence available. Given the difficulty of retrieving the historical truth—the

“bare facts” of what transpired between the two poets on that journey—what remains is the best and most satisfying interpretation of the data. As Frederick Holmes notes, the novel emphasizes the efficacy of the imagination in providing us with provisional structures with which to make sense of the past.<sup>27</sup> As a historiographic metafiction, *Possession* constructs a notion of history predicated on interpretation, not on the discovery of historical “truths.” What is foregrounded is the process of *attempting* to assimilate historical data, and the necessity of literary and historical conventions to make a coherent and satisfying narrative out of the raw details of past lives. This is not to say that Byatt has dispensed with the notion of an historical referent, but that it is the frustrating, imprecise and finally rewarding *process* of “reaching back” for it that most fully captures her imagination.

#### IV. *Chatterton*: A History Rich in Possibilities

Like *Possession*, Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* is concerned with the human need to imagine and reinvent the past, at the same time as it insists that the past has a way of eluding the grasp of those who would try to represent it. The poet and plagiarist Thomas Chatterton lived in the eighteenth century, but his role in the novel is that of the “text” subsequently reconfigured by two Victorians, the painter Henry Wallis and the writer George Meredith, as well as the novel’s fictional twentieth-century protagonist, the struggling poet Charles Wychwood. *Chatterton* is a novel about plagiarism and forgery and the ways they necessarily complicate traditional notions of truth. The *Trew Histories of Bristol*, which the young Chatterton patches together from scraps of old manuscripts in the church storeroom and old histories found in his father’s library, aims to reunite “the Living and the Dead” by “[shoring] up these ancient Fragments with my own Genius.”<sup>28</sup> Chatterton’s pastiche constructs history out of the accounts of others, noting that “If I took a passage from each [old history], be it ever so short, I found that in Unison they became quite a new Account and, as it were, Chatterton’s Account” (p. 85). The conventional notion of historical “truth” is seen in this novel too as unattainable: layers of texts separate the historian from his subject, and his work becomes that of making the best synthesis of the accounts that have come before him. Dominick LaCapra’s definition of historical documents as “texts that supplement and rework ‘reality’ and not mere sources that divulge facts about ‘reality’”<sup>29</sup> suggests that history’s referent is not so much the empirical past but other texts; this idea is worked out literally (and to great comic effect) in Ackroyd’s novel.

Chatterton writes in explanation of his project that “I reproduc’d the Past and filled it with such Details that it was as if I were observing it in front of me: so the Language of ancient Dayes awoke the Reality itself for, tho’ I knew it was I who composed these Histories, I knew also that they were true ones” (p. 85). Ackroyd interrogates the idea of plagiarism by suggesting that there

is not much difference between Chatterton's inventing his *Trew Histories* from fragments of old bills and the accounts of earlier historians, and his "forging" the verse of actual dead poets under his own name. In representing himself as the fifteenth-century monk and poet Thomas Rowley, Chatterton notes that "I dressed him in Raggs, I made him Blind and then I made him Sing. I compos'd Elegies and Epicks, Ballads and Songs, Lyricks and Acrosticks, all of them in that curious contriv'd Style which speedily became the very Token of my own Feelings" (p. 87). The point here is that Rowley *is* Chatterton, and Chatterton's gift is not for forgery but ventriloquism, the ability to refract his own voice through a variety of personae.

Chatterton himself realizes that "The truest Plagiarism is the truest Poetry," casting into doubt the value (and even the possibility) of originality in a way that persists throughout the three centuries covered by the scope of the novel. When Wychwood's librarian friend Philip Stack discovers that the batty novelist Harriet Scrope has "borrowed" her plots from a late nineteenth-century writer, he shrugs it off by telling himself that "there were only a limited number of plots in the world (reality was finite after all) and no doubt it was inevitable that they would be reproduced in a variety of contexts" (p. 70). What is at stake here is at once plagiarism and an acknowledgment of the inevitability of intertextuality. Umberto Eco has said that in writing *The Name of the Rose* he discovered "what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told."<sup>30</sup> For Ackroyd, literary creativity consists largely of the ability to absorb and then rearticulate the past.

Henry Wallis' famous painting of the dead Chatterton becomes the focus of the debate between Wallis and George Meredith (who sat for Wallis as the model for Chatterton) over whether it is the artist's project to copy the world as it is or was, or whether he actually creates it anew. When Meredith claims that words *are* the reality, Wallis, personally obsessed with realistically representing Chatterton's death, balks—his trade depends on having a real object to depict. Meredith's rejoinder evokes Jameson's definition of pastiche by suggesting that the invention can actually appear more real than what it ostensibly represents:

I said that the *words* were real, Henry, I did not say that what they *depicted* was real. Our dear dead poet created the monk Rowley out of thin air, and yet he has more life in him than any medieval priest who actually existed. The invention is always more real . . . But Chatterton did not create an individual simply. He invented an entire period and made its imagination his own: no one had properly understood the medieval world until Chatterton summoned it into existence. The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it. And that is why he is feared. (P. 157, ellipsis Ackroyd's)



Meredith's conviction that the poet "creates" the world anew complicates the question of truth, since it seems to do away with any referent to which the artist's representation is bound. "Creating the world" also has special resonance for the problem of representing the past. When Charles sits down to write the preface for his study of Chatterton, he gets as far as noting that documents recently discovered show that he wrote in the guise of Gray, Blake, and Cowper, among others; consequently, "our whole understanding of eighteenth-century poetry will have to be revised." Then he stops, uncertain of "whether all this information came from the documents themselves, or from the biographies which Philip had lent him" (p. 127). The major revision of eighteenth-century poetry Charles suggests would be based on an array of contradictory biographies and two bags full of documents given to him—sheaves of poems written in the styles of a wide variety of eighteenth-century poets, poems whose veracity is questionable. To add to the many levels of forgery already in play, Charles has made photocopies of the originals, commenting to Philip with some mirth that "There has to be a copy . . . How could we know that it was real without a copy?" (p. 93, ellipsis Ackroyd's). This is one of the novel's central questions, and its answer is ultimately the ironic one that imitation proves, rather than copies, reality.

Charles comes to realize that even if he could get a fix on the empirical events of Chatterton's life, he couldn't know the "truth" of that life: although it did exist, there is no privileged textual rendition of it. Indeed, there may not be a way to render it in words at all. Initially irritated by the myriad discrepancies and contradictions in the biographies of Chatterton, Charles soon feels exhilarated by the impossibility of certainty, "for it meant that anything became possible. If there were no truths, everything was true" (p. 127). Charles's seemingly old-fashioned vision of art, with its "dream of wholeness, and of beauty" (p. 152), is opposed by Ackroyd to the cynical Jamesonesque voice which taunts (in the person of Andrew Flint, Charles's college friend and now a successful writer), "Don't you realise. . . that nothing survives now? Everything is instantly forgotten. There is no history anymore. There is no memory. There is no standard to encourage permanence—only novelty, and the whole endless cycle of new objects" (p. 150).

Ackroyd's novel is precisely the sort of text to give Jameson nightmares: its subject, after all, is the way in which an imitation can not only eclipse its referent, but make it unimportant, "one more idiolect among many." *Chatterton* is more open than *Possession* to Jameson's critique of postmodernism because not only does it suggest that it is impossible to really know the past, but it goes on to imply that since this is the case, why not fabricate historical events? *Chatterton*'s mixture of postmodernist relativism and a degree of sentimentality about the past is characteristic of the neo-Victorian genre. Yet at the same time that Ackroyd is skeptical about retrieving the past, he is painstaking in his recreations of actual historical

circumstances. His Chatterton, Wallis, and Meredith are at once historically faithful and plausibly alien—they are meant to be different from Charles, even though their concerns (representation, truth, language) demonstrate a remarkable affinity.

Perhaps the most important factor that keeps *Chatterton* from being entirely antithetical to Jameson's view of historicity is its faith in the redemptive power of the past. Working on his famous painting of Chatterton's death, Henry Wallis recognizes that although the young poet's image "could never be as perfect upon the canvas as it now was in his understanding" (p. 164), the painting nonetheless immortalizes its subject. This knowledge of the way the past survives into the present, enriching it immeasurably, permits Charles to die peacefully from a brain tumor. Just before he dies, he feels himself to be Chatterton, lying poisoned on his garret bed. Chatterton's death blends seamlessly into Charles' own, and helps him let go of his wife and son: "nothing was ever lost and yet this was the last time he would ever see them, the last time, the last time . . . Vivien. Edward. I met them on a journey somewhere. We were travelling together" (p. 169, ellipsis Ackroyd's). Charles also lives on, as Edward understands when he goes to see Wallis' painting in the Tate Gallery, and in Chatterton's place on the garret bed sees his dead father instead; and when Vivien looks at her son and sees "the lineaments of Charles' face: her husband was dead and yet he was not yet dead" (p. 181).

This, then, is the lesson of *Chatterton*: that recycling past lives and past texts serves as a constant reminder that we are not alone, that we are always accompanied by the ghosts of bygone days. The poignancy of Charles' premature death does not detract from the comforts afforded by Ackroyd's playful juxtapositions of historical periods and figures. A world in which a twentieth-century man can meet Thomas Chatterton in an Indian restaurant, or pass George Meredith on an apartment staircase, is one in which the past is never past, in which history perpetually surrounds us and creates a sense of community and continuity. Brian Finney notes that in this novel, "the past resolves itself into a series of texts which themselves interact, bringing past to bear on present and occasionally present to bear on past—or at least the past as it is textually constituted in and by the present."<sup>31</sup> The novel celebrates the construction of literary history from a myriad of voices and documents whose origins we may have no way of tracing successfully, and Ackroyd suggests that knowing whether the poetry attributed to William Blake is truly his or was composed by Thomas Chatterton does not really matter—that it is the cumulative richness of the voices that ultimately counts. This sounds like the sort of cavalier historicism Jameson would despise, and yet Ackroyd's novel is not without historical rigor. *Chatterton* is a novel about interpretation, and it is important to the novel's point that Charles' rereading of the story of Chatterton's death is proven incorrect. The fact that Charles' quest to discover

the truth about the poet ends unsuccessfully shows that some interpretations are more valid than others; even as it calls attention to how little evidence really exists for the generally accepted narrative of Chatterton's early demise. If there are no truths, and therefore everything is true, then the possibility of a redemptive past begins to fade from view—and yet although Charles exults in this statement, it turns out to be unsupported by the events of the novel. Everything is not “true” in *Chatterton*: the painting of Chatterton at fifty is a sham, and so, consequently, is Charles's revisionist theory.

*Chatterton* contradicts Flint's cynicism by insisting that history *does* survive, in texts, and that past figures and events are not “instantly forgotten.” Permanence, for Ackroyd, is found in a literary and artistic culture that infuses present society and helps to shape its identity. At the same time, *Chatterton* is thoroughly informed by the postmodern world view it gently mocks. In Ackroyd, appropriating the “styles” of the past is the means through which bygone lives become accessible and meaningful. Chatterton, Wallis, and Meredith were alive once, and Ackroyd's novel resurrects them to demonstrate the continuing relevance of their conversation about truth and the difficulty of representing accurately the past. Jameson's fear, extrapolated to Ackroyd's novel, would be that Ackroyd's sense of history boils down to little more than the invention of past lives, and yet I do not believe that is the message at the heart of *Chatterton*. Ackroyd's implication that we cannot know “the” truth of Chatterton's life is not to say that that one true version never existed. What Ackroyd is claiming is that because the past comes to us in textualized forms, what we are left with is a proliferation of possible “truths,” some more persuasive than others. The original—Chatterton's actual life—is not simply “one idiolect among many,” but Ackroyd does presume it unavailable. The end result is to show us that Thomas Chatterton did exist, and that the novel can bring him back to us—not in a pure state, but filtered through our present perspective. If, as Flint contends, postmodernity is made up of “the whole endless cycle of new objects,” one of the “objects” being recycled is the past, which is never new, but always newly relevant.

If *Possession* and *Chatterton* suggest that there are things about centuries past that are simply not knowable, they also exhibit a great deal of faith in the power of human curiosity. These are both, fundamentally, novels about literary detectives, and although Roland and Maud discover a long-hidden love affair while Charles' discoveries turn out to be fakes, what matters more than the substance of the truth is the *process* of truth-seeking. Jameson's sense of history's redemptive power exists in both novels in what the various “detectives” learn from their forays into the past; however, in these texts it is not the facts that alter irrevocably the present, but rather the protagonists' glimpses of what *might* have happened. As I have pointed out, it matters that Philip discovers Charles' findings to be invalid, but this seems less interesting to Ackroyd than the possibilities opened up by Charles' initial investigations

into Chatterton's life and death. Recalling Charles' excitement over the putative Chatterton manuscripts, Philip realizes that it might be best not to make any further attempts to prove or disprove their authenticity. He and Charles had always agreed that "there is a charm and even a beauty in unfinished work—the face which is broken by the sculptor and then abandoned, the poem which is interrupted and never ended" and Philip wonders "Why should historical research not also remain incomplete, existing as a possibility and not fading into knowledge?" (p. 213).

It seems unlikely that Ackroyd is suggesting here that professional historians work only in the realm of "possibility." What he is doing, instead, is illuminating the provisionality of historical knowledge. Kiely has described this as the purpose of postmodern historical fiction: not to "correct" mistakes or "set the record straight," as it would be for the historian, but rather to "remember" mistakes, which for Kiely amounts to recognizing that there have always been alternate paths that documented history might have taken.<sup>32</sup> Ackroyd's choice of the word "fading" above articulates the loss that occurs when, in making definitive claims, historians must reduce a web of possible meanings to one piece of "knowledge." This is a reduction both Ackroyd and Byatt find unnecessary in the province of historical fiction, and that Jameson sees as instrumental to the Marxist historical project.

Neo-Victorian novels like *Possession* and *Chatterton*, then, attest to the unflagging desire for knowledge of the past, a desire not extinguished by doubts as to how accessible it really is. Ackroyd and Byatt feed this desire, although not to repletion, by offering visions of the present as an endless recycling of moments from past lives, past days, past texts. Seen in this light, Andrew Flint's comment on the loss of history and permanence and their replacement by a cycle of perpetual novelty seems to be precisely the view of popular culture that *Chatterton* and *Possession* counter. Things *do* survive, words foremost among them, and these moments from the past give us sustenance and remind us that we are not alone. Eliot's *Middlemarch* paves the way by offering a fictional world in which Dorothea and Bulstrode develop as characters by revising their interpretations of their personal histories. Eliot represents the past as entirely redemptive: because he can bring himself to accept his long-buried misdeeds, Bulstrode is able to repent and salvage some shreds of self-esteem. In *Possession*, Byatt depicts the past as a rich storehouse of knowledge about the dead. In uncovering the secret romance of Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte, Roland and Maud (and their fellow scholars) must revise their understanding of Victorian literary history, and expand their sense of how men and women lived and loved in the nineteenth century. Even *Chatterton*, with its thoroughly postmodern skepticism regarding how accurately we can ever know the past, exhibits faith in the redemptive power of history by articulating the rich textures of a life in which the past permeates the present. Charles Wychwood's investigations into the life of Chatterton

bring him solace: the serendipitously discovered painting of a middle-aged Chatterton, with its implications that the poet did not die at seventeen after all, conjures the undocumented paths history might have taken, and demonstrates the power of these unremarked possibilities to add an intriguing dimension to the present.

The novels I have discussed in this essay disrupt and complicate Fredric Jameson's notion of the "history of aesthetic styles" by showing that postmodern historical novels can indeed represent the past as redemptive. If Jameson sees postmodern consumer society as (like Ackroyd's Andrew Flint) an endless cycle of new objects with only the most superficial relation to the past, Byatt's and Ackroyd's novels, to varying degrees, show the postmodern present to be utterly emplotted by the past, and immeasurably enriched by it.

UNIVERSITY OF EVANSVILLE

## NOTES

- 1 I am broadly defining neo-Victorian novels as those novels that adopt a postmodern approach to history and that are set at least partly in the nineteenth century. This capacious umbrella includes texts that revise specific Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters, and "new" Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions.  
Although this is not the place for an exhaustive catalogue of the neo-Victorian subgenre, I do wish to offer examples of the three categories I describe above. Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990) epitomizes the first category, while I would place in the second group Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* (New York: Grove Press, 1987) and A. S. Byatt's novella "The Conjugal Angel" (in *Angels and Insects*, New York: Random House, 1990). Byatt's *Possession* (New York: Random House, 1990) and Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (London: Canongate, 1989) are two of the best-known exemplars of the final class of neo-Victorian novels.
- 2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1991), p. 18. All references will hereafter be cited in the text in abbreviated form as *CL*.
- 3 The waning interest in historical facts that Jameson sees as endemic to postmodern historicity reaches its zenith in the arguments over Holocaust representation, the paramount example of the problems engendered by the relativism of the postmodern historiographers. Without recourse to historical facts, Carlo Ginzburg argues, there is no way to discredit distortions of the past, fascist or otherwise. See Ginzburg's critique of Hayden White in "Just One Witness," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 82-96, and "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 79-92.
- 4 Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 150.

- 5 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 34. All references will hereafter be cited in the text in abbreviated form as *PU*.
- 6 For a fuller articulation of the characteristics of postmodern historiography, see F.R. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism," *History and Theory* 28 (1989): 137-53.
- 7 In tracing the relationship of *Possession* and *Chatterton* to *Middlemarch*, I am following in the footsteps of Robert Kiely and David Cowart, both of whom have written well about the Borgesian paradox of texts creating their own precursors. See Kiely, *Reverse Tradition: Postmodern Fictions and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993) and Cowart, *Literary Symbiosis: The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1993). Although my own project focusses on postmodern historical novels, and specifically those concerned (at least in part) with the Victorian Era, I see my work as synchronous with both these authors in its desire to defamiliarize distinctions commonly made between nineteenth- and late-twentieth-century fictions.
- 8 Murray Krieger, "Fiction, History and Empirical Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 1,2 (1974): 339.
- 9 My discussion here is beholden to Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988). Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (p. 5).
- 10 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973). See pp. 7-11 for a definition of emplotment, pp. x, 427 for a discussion of the ways in which historiography and fiction converge. White notes that "the historian performs an essentially poetic act in 'prefiguring' the historical field upon which he will bring to bear various explanatory theories" (p. x, italics White's). I want also to stress here that the so-called postmodern historiographers are not the first to express skepticism about history's ability to "reproduce" the past. A.S. Byatt claims in her essay on Robert Browning that the understanding of history as "necessarily fictive" was in fact a "pervasive nineteenth-century perception" (*Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings* [New York: Turtle Bay Books, 1991], p. 5).
- 11 Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), p. 18.
- 12 See J. Hillis Miller, "Narrative and History," *ELH* 41 (1974): 455-73. Miller claims that "Insofar as a novel raises questions about the key assumptions of story-telling, for example about the notions of origin and end, about consciousness or selfhood, about causality, or about gradually emerging unified meaning, then this putting in question of narrative form becomes also obliquely a putting in question of history or the writing of history" (p. 462). In Miller's formulation, then, as a novel deconstructs the assumptions of realism in fiction, it also deconstructs "naive" (the word is Miller's) notions about history and the writing of history.
- 13 Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971), p. 4. According to Fleishman, the "truth" in historical novels must correspond with historical fact and is universal, transcending "pæs own temperaments and preoccupations." In addition, historical novels as he defines them liberate the reader from provincialism by compelling him or her to "leave home" and travel to other worlds.

- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 15 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 40, hereafter cited in the text.
- 16 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), p. 32.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 18 LaCapra, *Intellectual History*, p. 18.
- 19 Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 45.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 22 A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, p. 542, hereafter cited in the text.
- 23 Kiely, *Reverse Tradition*, p. 187.
- 24 Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 5.
- 25 Kiely, *Reverse Tradition*, p. 187.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- 27 Frederick M. Holmes, "The Historical Imagination and the Victorian Past: A. S. Byatt's *Possession*," *English Studies in Canada* 20:3 (1994): 331.
- 28 Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p. 85, hereafter cited in the text.
- 29 LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, p. 19.
- 30 Umberto Eco, *Postscript to the Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), p. 20.
- 31 Brian Finney, "Peter Ackroyd, Postmodernist Play and *Chatterton*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 38.2 (1992): 258.
- 32 Kiely, *Reverse Tradition*, p. 184.

