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## *The Historical Novel*

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Through the plot [of the historical novel], at whose centre stands [the typical hero], a neutral ground is sought and found upon which the extreme, opposing social forces can be brought into a human relation with one another.

—Georg Lukács

In the nineteenth century, the “sense of the real” has been superseded by “realism,” and the dominant mode of the documentary novel becomes the historical novel. The term “historie” now disappears from the title pages of novels, since they no longer aspire to invoke what Richardson called “that kind of Historical Faith which Fiction itself is generally read with, tho’ we know it to be Fiction.”<sup>1</sup> Banished from the manner of representation, however, history resurfaces in the referent. Where pseudofactual novelists represented an abstract and undialectical relation between character and environment, and even the realist Fielding declared his lawyer in *Tom Jones* to have been alive for four thousand years, documentary novelists of the nineteenth century are historical novelists, for they view historical process as the crucible in which character and destiny are formed. Even those texts that recapitulate certain features of the pseudofactual novel’s documentary strategy—such as Dickens’s *David Copperfield* or Charles Reade’s *The Autobiography of a Thief*—incorporate the speaking “I” into a novelistic frame that locates the character’s identity in a historically specific fictional realm, rather than in a speciously authentic mode of discourse. Other modes of documentary fiction enjoy

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Richardson, *Selected Letters*, ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 85.

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residual status in the nineteenth century, but the historical novel emerges as the paradigmatic mode of the genre.

The shift from pseudofactuality to realism marks a major transformation in the conceptions of history that guide the practice of nineteenth-century novelists. When the novel's referent comes to be seen as possessing a dynamis in its own right, historicity need no longer be invoked to guarantee the text's representation of that referent. By a curious paradox, mimesis is empowered to interpret and judge historical actuality when it finally acknowledges its own distinctness as a mode of discourse: the novel loses its hesitancy about its propositional status when it admits that its assertion is fictional. The historical novel's separation from nonfictional kinds of writing such as history and journalism thus signals its adoption of a new view of the historical process shaping the relation of character to event. As Raymond Williams points out, it is only in the nineteenth century that the term "history" comes to denote not merely a mode of discourse or a universal process of change, but a crucial context for understanding the present.<sup>2</sup> This altered notion of historical process, we shall see, profoundly influences historiography of the time as well. From the Romantic history of Bancroft and Michelet to the "scientific" history of Ranke and Taine, nineteenth-century historical narratives take as their premise a view of history as the formative context of the present that sharply differentiates them from histories written during the century before. The historical novel thus participates in a broader transformation of historical consciousness. Its emergence as an unabashedly fictional kind of writing signals not its abandonment of the claim to represent historical actuality but its reformulation of this claim in accordance with a changing conception of that actuality.<sup>3</sup>

The representational strategy of the historical novel differs in three respects from the practice of earlier documentary fiction. First, the text now proposes cognition through an undisguised adoption of analogous configuration. Characters make their claim to truthfulness

<sup>2</sup>Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 119–20.

<sup>3</sup>For the view that the major transformation in modern historical consciousness occurred in the eighteenth century—and hence manifests itself in the eighteenth-century novel—see Leo Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding, and Gibbon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

not through their imposture of veracity but through their function as representative types; hence they convey cognition of the referent through their relationality. Moll compels interest by her billiardlike movement through a static world, but Cooper's Harvey Birch, in *The Spy*, gains credibility only as he is embedded in the context of a revolutionary crisis. Second, the plot of the historical novel relinquishes the historical probabilities accompanying the pseudofactual novel and directs its narrative energy to the elaboration of a pattern of complication and resolution that interprets and evaluates the social world. The historical novel posits complication as an essential component of the historical dialectic; resolution becomes a teleological necessity, and totalization emerges as the principal strategy for reproducing the lineaments of historical actuality. Third, empirical data enter the historical novel not to validate the author's honesty but to reinforce the text's claim to offer a persuasive interpretation of its referent. Where details in the pseudofactual novel could be outrageous and anomalous so long as they purported to be true (we recall Mme d'Aulnoy's fantastic tales of intrigue), factual references in the historical novel must be plausible, yet they need make no pretension to a literal retelling of events. When a figure from world history enters the fictional world, he or she verifies the trajectory of the plot; when a corroborative preface or footnote is attached to the text, it authenticates the propositionality embedded in the analogous configuration. Telling the truth has become a matter of accurate generalization.

The representational strategy of the historical novel bespeaks, in short, a new epistemological program. In the closing section of this chapter, I shall argue that this epistemological program points to the qualitative alteration taking place in the relations of production characteristic of an emergent industrial capitalist society. Realism, I shall propose, articulates the triumph of reification; the historical novel's powerful synthesis of the dialectics of social change mediates the emergence of capital itself as the supreme social subject. Industrial capitalism is thus in one sense the hero of my tale here. Following the lead of Marx, who grudgingly admired the achievement of nineteenth-century capital in drawing the economy of the entire globe into a universal market, I acknowledge the higher level of mimetic abstraction made possible by the more fully developed abstraction of the exchange relation in the era of the mechanically powered machine. But the very abstraction that derives from the increased com-

plexity in the realm of the concrete makes it increasingly difficult to return to the realm of the concrete; by rendering capital the supreme social subject, reification posits the equivalence of the different subjects who are subordinated to capital's hegemony. In most nineteenth-century historical novels, the vantage point of the authorial subject thus presents itself as interchangeable with that of the reader. The ideological coloration of the consciousness that shapes the text is no longer foregrounded for critical consideration, as it was in the pseudofactual novel. Instead, the text's goal of rendering empirically grounded representation readily lapses into positivism, and totalization threatens to become self-evidence. In its contradictory blend of disability and empowerment, the historical novel mediates the reification that both expands and limits the epistemological horizons of nineteenth-century discourse.

It should be apparent that the representational strategy of the historical novel creates new problems at the same time that it solves old ones. The historical novel indeed makes possible a comprehensive portraiture of past events that was unavailable to the pseudofactual novel. But where the empirical self-consciousness of the pseudofactual novel continually called attention to the epistemological relation between fact and generalization, the more confident empiricism of the historical novel tends to simplify this relation. The historical novel's "facts" appear to anchor the text's analogous configuration in historical actuality by proposing that particular corroborative data bear an unmediated reference to the public historical record. Actually, however, these data function to validate *a posteriori* the text's particular ideological construction of its referent. Documentation in the historical novel is intrinsically tautological; rather than confirming the text's assertions about social reality, it corroborates a reality assumed to be self-evident. This documentary practice was bound to recoil upon itself. In the course of the century, the historical novel's empiricist claims enter into a state of crisis, ultimately issuing in the profound epistemological skepticism characterizing modernist documentary fiction.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The debate over the meaning of the term "realism" is heated and never-ending. In recent years, of course, the notion that nineteenth-century realism aims at transparent "reflection" has been widely challenged. See, for example, Leo Bersani's *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976). Bersani argues, "The or-

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Lukács's writings on nineteenth-century realism remain the locus classicus of the theory of the historical novel, and any Marxist discussion of the genre should take them as the point of departure. The central critical category in Lukács's theory of realism is the "type," who, as fictional protagonist, provides

a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type a type is not its average quality, not its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentation of their extremes, rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs.<sup>5</sup>

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dered significances of realistic fiction are presented as immanent to society, whereas in fact they are the mythical denial of that society's fragmented nature. . . . The formal and psychological reticence of most realistic fiction makes for a secret complicity between the novelist and his society's illusions about its own order. Realistic fiction serves nineteenth-century society by providing it with strategies for containing (and repressing) its disorder within significantly structured stories about itself" (61, 62). There is much of value here; as I shall argue throughout this chapter, realism does entail ideological operations of containment and repression. But we should not lose sight of the empiricist goals—and achievements—of nineteenth-century realism, which did in fact manage to capture the totality of social relations with a new degree of precision. As Harry Levin observes, "Etymologically, realism is thing-ism. . . . Platonic idealists and scholastic 'realists'—and let us not be confused by the misnomer—had believed in the priority of universals, *universalia ante rem*. Specific objects were mere accidents, or at best symbolic correspondences with the actualities of a transcendent otherworld. That they should be valued for their own sake, that things should have meaning in themselves, marked the triumph of empiricism, materialism, and worldliness" (*The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1963]). For the various formulations of "realism" that have been influential in writing this chapter, see George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Taylor Stoehr, "Realism and Verisimilitude," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, 11 (1970): 1269–88; Joan Williams, *The Realist Novel in England: A Study in Development* (London: Macmillan, 1974); Robert Alter, "Mimesis and the Motive for Fiction," *TriQuarterly*, 42 (Spring 1978): 224–49; Everett W. Knight, *The Novel as Structure and Praxis: From Cervantes to Malraux* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1980); Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech-Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 201–23; and of course Lukács's many writings on realism.

<sup>5</sup>George Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, Universal Library (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), 6.

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The fate of the typical hero thus embodies in microcosm the essential trajectory of the historical dialectic: “Through the plot, at whose centre stands the hero, a neutral ground is sought and found upon which the extreme, opposing social forces can be brought into a human relationship with one another.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the complications and resolutions constituting the plot of the historical novel represent what the author sees as the essential dynamic of historical process. The world-historical hero here plays a necessarily subsidiary role. As Lukács says of Scott’s novels, the great representatives of the age “can never be central figures of the action. . . . The important leading figure, who embodies an historical movement, necessarily does so at a certain level of abstraction. Scott, by first showing the complex and involved character of popular life itself, creates this being which the leading figure then has to generalize and concentrate in an historical deed.” Articulating the lesson of the French Revolution—that history is the product of mass activity, rather than of the subjective intentions of kings and generals—the world-historical hero functions, in Hegelian fashion, as an index to the unconscious strivings of the masses of people. But the real “struggles and antagonisms of history” are best represented by “mediocre” heroes who, “in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces.” In this context, “it matters little whether individual details, individual facts are historically correct or not. . . . Detail . . . is only a means of achieving historical faithfulness, for making concretely clear the historical necessity of a concrete situation.”

In many ways Lukács offers an accurate and penetrating description of the ideological premises of the historical novel. Certainly Scott’s novels, which Lukács repeatedly invokes as pure instances of the form, fulfill Lukács’s criteria for realistic representation. In *Ivanhoe*, for example, fictional characters such as Cedric the Saxon and Front-de-Boeuf act out the historical contradiction between Saxons and Normans; historical personages such as Robin Hood and Richard the Lion-Hearted assume ancillary roles that emphasize the primary function of the anonymous populace in effecting historical change. In *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since*, the typical hero emerges as the dialectical embodiment of vast social forces. Thus Waverley’s alternating attraction to Rose Bradwardine and Flora Mac-Ivor sets forth

<sup>6</sup>Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962), 36. The statements quoted below appear on pp. 39, 34, and 59.

in microcosm the contrary appeals of Lowland concession and Highland rebellion; his initial rejection of, and ultimate reconciliation with, his own aristocratic status illustrate Scott's melioristic view of the path of historical change. When Bonnie Prince Charlie enters the tale, he furnishes a specific link with the historical record, but it is relatively unimportant whether or not the real Pretender followed the exact circumstantial course that Scott outlines for his fictional counterpart. What matters most is that Bonnie Prince Charlie's quixotic actions validate Waverley's eventual decision to repudiate the Stuart rebellion; the world-historical hero is a catalyst, not a cause.

Lukács pays little attention to the question of documentary corroboration, but we can expand upon his analysis by noting the ways in which Scott's testimonial materials are intended to reinforce the propositional claims of his novels. In the various prefaces and the postscript to *Waverley*, for example, Scott announces his departure from Gothic antiquarianism and his ambition to represent the historical forces that have projected Scotland into modern times. His goal is, indeed, to use fiction to delineate the trajectory of history: "The change, though steadily and rapidly progressive, has, nevertheless, been gradual; and, like those who drift down the stream of a deep and smooth river, we are not aware of the progress we have made until we fix our eye on the now distant point from which we have been drifted."<sup>7</sup> While Scott is careful to point out that his novel is based on historical research and the testimony of participants in the Highland Rebellion, he openly admits that his narrative is a "romance" and that he has "embodied in imaginary scenes, and ascribed to fictitious characters, a part of the incidents which I then received from those who were actors in them." The difference between this statement and Behn's claim to be relating neither "novel" or "story" is striking, and it bespeaks a qualitative shift in the cognitive capacities attributed to mimesis. Romance, imagination, and fiction are now means, rather than barriers, to assertion.

Moreover, *Waverley*'s apparatus of footnotes testifies to the novel's presumption to be a reliable guide to the characteristic features of eighteenth-century Scottish history and culture. Thus one note tells us that "the sanguine Jacobites, during the eventful years 1745–46,

<sup>7</sup>Sir Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814; London: Nelson, n.d.), 553. The passages quoted below appear on pp. 554, 234, and 154.

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kept up the spirits of their party by the rumour of descent from France on behalf of the Chevalier St. George.” Another, referring to Fergus Mac-Ivor’s regaining the estate that had been forfeited after his father’s participation in the insurrection of 1715, remarks that “it was not till after the total destruction of the clan influence, after 1745, that purchasers could be found, who offered a fair price for the estates forfeited in 1715, which were then brought to sale by the creditors of the York Buildings Co., who had purchased the whole or greater part from the government at a very small price.” Unlike the documentary materials in the pseudofactual novel, which testify to the text’s authenticity but not necessarily to its truth, these documentary materials establish the verifiability of the text’s generalized portraiture of customs and historical movements. The text must present a valid analogy to history, these notes imply, if the author has taken such pains to research his subject. (Indeed, one might note, even the typographical presence of the notes serves to anchor the text in an authenticated reality. The very act of leaving the story and moving one’s eyes to the small print at the bottom of the page has the effect of invoking an extratextual source of information.)

Cooper’s novels, which Lukács also praises as exemplars of classical historical fiction, adopt a comparable strategy in their project of narrating and explaining the early years of the Republic. In *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground*, for example, the battle over war-torn Westchester County projects in microcosm the collision of opposed historical forces. Even the rather insipid lovers, Dunwoodie and Frances, take on the status of historical actors, in that the barriers to their romantic fulfillment are thrown up by the contention of rebels and loyalists. And the omnipresent figure of the double agent, Harvey Birch, points to the shifting nature of political allegiances: his interactions with both camps give full play to the attractiveness of the British cause (Cooper is something of an Anglophile) at the same time that they mobilize the reader’s sympathies on the side of the rebels. In this context, the text’s documentary apparatus serves an important validating function. Cooper’s preface, which informs us that the novel is based on a story he was told about the experiences of an actual double agent during the Revolutionary War, parades the narrative’s fictionality and openly asserts the generalization encoded in the text: “[My] theme,” he declares, “is patriotism,” and “the hero of the

anecdote just related is the best illustration of this subject.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the mysterious figure who turns out to be George Washington corroborates the nationalistic theme. “That Providence destines this country for some great and glorious fate I must believe,” beams Washington, “while I witness the patriotism that pervades the bosoms of her lowest citizens.” The novel ends, indeed, with a “document” that directly links the world-historical hero to the fate of Harvey Birch, who, having died fighting for his country once again in the War of 1812, is found clutching to his bosom a paper that reads: “Circumstances of political importance, which involve the lives and fortunes of many, have hitherto kept secret what this paper now reveals. Harvey Birch has for years been a faithful and unrequited servant of his country. Though man does not, may God reward him for his conduct!”

*The Spy* most clearly shows Cooper as a self-consciously historical novelist.<sup>9</sup> It bears noting, however, that even the Leatherstocking novels, which do not portray world-historical heroes, introduce documentary materials in strategically similar ways. In the largely auto-biographical *The Pioneers*, for example, Cooper includes a set of corroborative statements that reverse the role assigned to documentation in the pseudofactual novel. The preface, informing us that the novel replicates many personalities from the Cooperstown of Cooper’s youth, makes the peculiar claim that generalization is superior to precise historicity. In response to inquires about “how much of [the novel’s] contents is literal fact, and how much is intended to represent a general picture, . . . the author is very sensible that, had he confined himself to the latter, *always the most effective, as it is the most valuable mode of conveying knowledge of this sort*, he would have made a far better book” (italics added). He later adds, “The incidents of this tale are purely a fiction.”<sup>10</sup> The role of the corroborative preface, it now seems, is to reclaim the authorial role that was previously disavowed;

<sup>8</sup>James Fenimore Cooper, *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1821; New York: Putnam’s, n.d.), vi. The passages quoted below appear on pp. 421 and 429–30.

<sup>9</sup>For a thorough discussion of Cooper’s strategy as a historical novelist, see “Cooper: The Range of the American Historical Novel,” in Harry B. Henderson III, *Versions of the Past: The Historical Imagination in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 50–90.

<sup>10</sup>Cooper, *The Pioneers; or, The Sources of the Susquehanna: A Descriptive Tale* (1823; New York: Putnam’s, n.d.), ii.

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we have come a long way from Mme d'Aulnoy's denial that she composes "novel . . . or story." All the same, the text contains a number of footnotes that verify the fiction's grounding in personal experience. Thus, describing the bass-seining episode, Cooper remarks, "Of all the fish the writer has ever tasted, he thinks the one in question the best"; recounting Judge Temple's munificence to the pioneering poor (presumably a fictive rendition of the activities of Cooper's own father, William Cooper), the author assures us that "all this was literally true." The unmediated assertion of something "literally true" nestles in the bosom of a narrative that is "purely a fiction," providing personal corroboration that a text that does "represent a general picture" does indeed tell the truth.

In some ways, then, the above analysis of the uses of documentation in Scott and Cooper confirms and even extends Lukács's discussion of the representational strategy of the realistic historical novel. But my analysis also challenges Lukács's contention that, by virtue of its objectivist epistemology, the realistic historical novel is therefore privileged to portray from a neutral standpoint "all the humanly and socially essential determinants . . . present on their highest level of development." According to Lukács, writers like Scott and Cooper could transcend the limitations of their class perspectives and present objectively valid portrayals of historical process because of their strategic location in that process. In the wake of the French Revolution, but before the proletarian upheavals of 1848, the bourgeoisie were still a residually progressive class, engaged in the process of consolidating their victory over feudalism. Their interest was not yet inalterably opposed to that of the masses with whom they had marched under the banner of liberty, equality, and fraternity; they could, therefore, pose themselves as exemplars of universal humanity. As a result of the presumably nonantagonistic contradiction shaping the historical dialectic, writers of this period could view the emergence of national destiny from a nonpartisan position: for Lukács, realism is the fruit of the privileged ideological stance made possible by the political configuration of pre-1848 Europe. The early nineteenth-century historical novel is therefore beyond ideology. Lukács stipulated, we will recall, that the plot of the historical novel constitutes a "*neutral ground* . . . upon which the extreme opposing social forces can be brought into a human relationship with each other" (italics added). The echo of Cooper's subtitle to *The Spy* is not entirely acci-

dental: both writer and critic see historical process as affording a position of political—and epistemological—objectivism.

But a close scrutiny of both literary and political modes of representation in this era produces, I believe, quite a different conclusion: the works of Scott and Cooper are saturated with ideology, at no time more so than when they seem to be engaging in an unmediated transposition of historical realities into fiction. The choice of an Edward Waverley or a Harvey Birch as typical hero, to begin with, hardly affords the author an empyrean view of political conflict. Waverley functions as a prescriptive rather than a neutral norm; Scott proffers a generic contract that requires the endorsement of a number of ideological assumptions, foremost among which is the notion that an Englishman, by virtue of his accession to the “steadily and rapidly progressive . . . change” through which the Highlanders were defeated, is a better index to historical process than is a member of the race that “has now almost entirely vanished from the land.” Were Fergus Mac-Ivor presented as the typical hero, and the plot’s resolution centered around his tragic fate, *Waverley* would bear a very different relation to the raw materials constituting its referent.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Cooper’s delegation of typical status to Harvey Birch carries a number of implications. Birch’s position as a figure marginal to the very society he is trying to liberate suggests that the revolutionary process that relies upon the participation of such outsiders need not incorporate them into its postrevolutionary resolution. Birch remains, fortunately, celibate, requiring no marital denouement to his personal destiny; he therefore is freed from any permanent association with lower-class characters speaking crude English, yet also kept from too close a contact with the Whartons and Dunwoodies who inherit the reins of power. Birch’s glad acceptance of Washington’s fa-

<sup>11</sup>In arguing that Scott commits himself to a certain view of progress by positing Waverley as the typical hero, I am not claiming that Scott’s portrayal of the supersession of the Highlanders is free of ambivalence. As Avrom Fleishman has noted, Scott absorbed from Scottish speculative history—particularly Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767) and the teachings of Dugald Stuart—a highly contradictory view of the relation of tradition to progress in historical development. Fleishman declares, “One of the reasons . . . the historical novel begins with Scott is that the tension between tradition and modernity first achieved its definitive form in Scotland.” The Scottish speculative historians were, Fleishman maintains, “scientific Whigs” who viewed the course of Scottish history as a combination of tragedy, melodrama, and above all historical necessity (*The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971], 38, 46).

vor, moreover, obscures the fact that he does not belong to the class that will (if Washington has anything to say about it) be enfranchised after the war is over.

In short, the heroes of *Waverley* and *The Spy* project anything but a neutral typicality signaling essential historical truths. Rather, typicality becomes coterminous with synecdoche: the bourgeois protagonist “stands for” the dynamic totality of society in a way that sloughs over very real historical contradictions among very real social groups. Enclosing social conflicts within the apparently benign framework of a representative fictional microcosm, the classical historical novel articulates the rationale of representative government, which masks the reality of class conflict and social inequality by positing a pluralistic social order in which all antagonisms are presumably voiced, considered, and then reconciled.

The politically synecdochic status of the classical historical novel’s protagonist is reinforced by the ways in which the text characteristically marshals its documentary apparatus. The world-historical hero, pace Lukács, does not simply “grow out of the being of the age”; rather, he corroborates a myth of nationalistic progress that is quintessentially class-bound. Scott’s Pretender illustrates the folly of monarchical rebellion that would turn back the clock of history; he prepares the reader for the text’s endorsement of Waverly’s accession to English hegemony, even as he allows full play to the attractiveness of the Highland cause. Cooper’s Washington acknowledges the energy and integrity of the anonymous Harvey Birches who guarantee the success of the Revolution, even as he lays the basis for their later marginalization. The historical novel gives play to the historical dialectic, to be sure, but this historical dialectic is mediated by the ideological contradictions internal to each writer, and it is synthesized in accordance with the dominant aspect of that ideological contradiction. The world-historical hero characteristically enters the plot in its final phases, but this does not therefore imply (or exclusively imply) the author’s fascination with the purposive agency of the rank and file makers of history. The maneuver also glosses over the covert nature of bourgeois rule, which equates class interest with popular nationalism. Moreover, the use of prefaces and footnotes in classical historical novels can be seen as further evidence of the text’s embeddedness in various political premises. When Scott tells us that it was only after 1745 that “fair” prices could be obtained for the chieftans’ forfeited

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lands by the creditors of the York Building Co., he is endorsing a distinctly partisan view of equity. When Cooper reassures us that the account of Judge Temple's kindness to his tenants is "literally true," he espouses a landholder's view on class relations in the United States at the end of the eighteenth century: these were, after all, also the years of Shay's Rebellion.<sup>12</sup>

Lukács's theory of realism thus offers only a partial account of the referential activities of the classical historical novel. Lukács quite correctly points to the historical circumstances that gave historical novelists the confidence to position themselves above and outside the historical process they described, but he gives far too much credence to their posture of neutrality.<sup>13</sup> The classical historical novelist's implicit claim to stand above ideology is itself an ideological position, one positing the equivalence of essence and phenomenon, cognition and perception. The text's representation of its referent is, quite simply, offered as equivalent to the referent itself; its configuration proposes itself as not only analogous but in fact homologous with that of historical actuality, and the empirical corroboration it provides is tautological.<sup>14</sup> In the shift from pseudofactual to historical modes of documentary mimesis, ideological abstraction has been transferred from the represented subject to the representing author. Where the pseudofactual novel reinforced a disjunction between the asserting

<sup>12</sup>Shari Benstock, in an analysis of the rhetorical function of footnotes in fiction, argues that "the notational system implies an extrareferentiality that does not exist in fiction (where all is fiction, even the notes), so that the notes can only extend the authority of the text by seeming to enlarge the context in which the fiction takes place" ("At the Margin of Discourse: Footnotes in the Fictional Text," *PMLA*, 98 [March 1983]: 219–20). Benstock's remark may well be applicable to such writers as Fielding, Joyce, and Sterne, but it offers an inaccurate account of works residing squarely in the realistic tradition—which, when they use footnotes, insistently refer beyond the text to corroborate the explanatory paradigm of the text.

<sup>13</sup>In a chapter of my "The Politics of Criticism: Historical Contexts of Marxist Literary Theory" (forthcoming), I explore the connection between Lukács's theory of realism, his advocacy of nationalism, and the politics of the United Front against Fascism endorsed by the Third International in 1935.

<sup>14</sup>By the distinction between "analogy" and "homology" in relation to the problem of fictional reference, I mean that the former implies a correspondence in function, while the latter implies a correspondence in structure, origin, and development as well as function. Homology involves a contractual agreement that the world of the novel replicates its referent in a totalizing way: every particular is drawn into a configuration that purports to replicate reality diachronically as well as synchronically. For more on the distinction between analogy and homology, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 104–6.

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speaker and the disavowing author, the historical novel proposes a transcendental standpoint outside the text from which the text's competing ideological voices can be juxtaposed and then reconciled. As Heidegger commented of the epistemological transition from Descartes to Kant, “‘I think’ becomes ‘I bind together.’”<sup>15</sup> To read a classical historical novel is to be invited to participate in a generic contract with an authorial presence that “binds together” the text, empyrean in its pretensions to autonomy but in fact implicated in every shade of characterization and turn of plot.

### *From Typicality to Anachronism: The Historical Novel as Genre*

Scott’s influence on mimetic practice was enormous, and by mid-century the historical novel was established as a genre in its own right. Leslie Stephen voiced a prevalent nineteenth-century fascination with historicism when he praised Scott for his ability to “describe no character without assigning to it its place in the social organism which has been growing up since the earliest dawn of history.”<sup>16</sup> Stephen’s echo of Darwin’s phrase “the earliest dawn of history” (from the conclusion to *On the Origin of Species*) is by no means accidental, even if it was perhaps unintentional. Where the model of mechanistic atomism provides a metaphor for the informing epistemological assumptions of the pseudofactual novel, the model of biological organism articulates those of the historical novel.

But Scott’s legacy, as we have seen, was contradictory—capable of a totalizing, dialectical synthesis of the particular and the universal, but prone to an empiricist overdetermination that simply renders self-evident the relation between fact and generalization, text and referent. Both tendencies are visible in the novels of Scott’s descendants. In some novels, the interest in the historical genesis of the “social organism” involved the reader in a sophisticated and self-critical mi-

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in J. M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism, and the Dialectics of Form* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), 181.

<sup>16</sup>Leslie Stephen, “Sir Walter Scott,” in *Hours in a Library* (1871; London, 1907), 1:221. The point that Stephen echoed Darwin was first made by John Henry Raleigh, “What Scott Meant to the Victorians,” in *Time, Place, and Idea: Essays on the Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 119.

metic contract. The documentary apparatus accompanying such works as *Henry Esmond* and *War and Peace*, for example, expresses a complex awareness of history as both process and discourse; the tautological footnote is abandoned, world-historical figures are treated with a skeptical irony, and the authorial preface calls attention to the ideological perspective that shapes the text's totalizing portraiture of past events. Even in the early decades of the nineteenth century, however, Scott's model had prompted some novelists (for example, W. H. Ainsworth and G. P. R. James) in the direction of a florid costumery that left out the material premises of Scott's representation of past events. Increasingly, then, historical novels substituted psychological anachronism or superfluous detail for historically concrete specificity, and the Hegelian "identical subject-object of history" became either the transcendental subject of the antiquarian historical novel or the nonpurposive object of the naturalistic novel. The use of documentary materials reflects this shift in consciousness: data that would presumably anchor the text in an extratextual reality becomes absorbed into the fictional representation, with the result that the analogous configuration, while more densely concretized than ever, loses the possibility of formulating a critical relation to its referent.

Much of the self-critical historicism of *Henry Esmond* and *War and Peace* derives from the conjunction of authorial commentary with the mimetic representation of historical events. Where Scott and Cooper tend to offer their plots as self-propelling mechanisms and to present the authorial preface as a discourse external to the plot, Thackeray and Tolstoy, as conscious authorial presences, explicitly theorize the views of historical process that their narratives imply. Thus the very marginality of the world-historical hero becomes a thematic proposition. In *War and Peace*, for example, Kutuzov and Napoleon continue to fulfill the ancillary function described by Lukács; clearly it is the Rostovs and Betzukovs who embody the dynamis of historical process. But, in his two epilogues to *War and Peace*, Tolstoy explicitly discusses the theory of history that shapes his portraiture of the two generals. Confronting the "specialist historians," the "universal historians," and the "historians of culture," Tolstoy declares the inadequacy of any philosophy of history that locates the springs of historical causality in the subjective wills of "heroes and rulers": "So long as histories are written of separate individuals, whether Caesars, Alexanders, Luthers, or Voltaires, and not the histories of all, absolutely

*all those who take part in an event, it is quite impossible to describe the movement of humanity without the conception of a force compelling men to direct their activity toward a certain end.”<sup>17</sup>* In depicting the divergent fates of Napoleon and Kutuzov, Tolstoy refutes the fervid nationalism that envisions the leader as a repository of the “collective will of the people”: Kutuzov succeeds where Napoleon fails precisely because he understands his own subsidiary role in the historical process. Authorial commentary thus asserts the accuracy of its mimetic representation (“*wherever in my novel historical persons speak or act, I have invented nothing, but have used historical material of which I have accumulated a whole library during my work*”), at the same time that it acknowledges the text itself to be the product of a theory of history that takes issue with other theories of history. Documentation validates not by effacing the relation between evidence and generalization but by arguing for the text’s particular construction of that relation.

*Henry Esmond*, while less expressive of a formulated theory of historical process than *War and Peace*, also comments explicitly on its lampoon of the Great Man theory of history. “Why shall History go on kneeling to the end of time?” Thackeray wonders in the opening chapter. “I am for having her rise up off her knees, and take a natural posture: not to be for ever performing cringes and congees like a court chamberlain, and shuffling backwards out of doors in the presence of a sovereign. In a word, I would have History familiar rather than heroic.”<sup>18</sup> Marlborough, Addison, and Swift are thus memorable in *Henry Esmond* mainly for their pettiness, while the Pretender is enshrined in historical absurdity for his lustful “dangling after Trix”—a propensity that, in Thackeray’s version of historical affairs, loses him the throne. Indeed, Thackeray is, of all the nineteenth-century historical novelists, perhaps the most audacious in his tampering with the historical record; he enacts a daring extension of Herbert Butterfield’s suggestion that “sometimes a wrench has to be given to history in order to subdue it to the demands of the novel.”<sup>19</sup> Scott’s Pretender is at least plausibly a participant in the rebellion that

<sup>17</sup>Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1865–69), trans. Louise Mande and Aylmer Mande (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1947), 1321. The passage quoted below appears on pp. 1358–59.

<sup>18</sup>William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.* (1852; New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962), 2. The statement quoted below is from p. 487.

<sup>19</sup>Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel: An Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 32.

Waverly joins; Thackeray's entirely flouts the canons of historical probability. The text's pseudomemoiristic form, moreover, compounds its satire upon the authority of received historical discourse. Presenting itself as the memoir of Henry Esmond, "written by himself," the novel is introduced by a preface supposedly composed by Esmond's daughter Rachel in 1778; as Thackeray admits in the dedication preceding this preface, the text "copies the manners and language of Queen Anne's time."<sup>20</sup> While *Henry Esmond* operates squarely within the conventions of realism—it is written in the third person and possesses little of the sense of the real characterizing fictions in "Queen Anne's time"—the effect of this documentary overdetermination is to direct attention to the question of narrative authority. The text offers a generalized interpretation of a past epoch without posing that interpretation as a neutral replication of that epoch; the author's privileged epistemological stance proposes totality, but not tautology.

Tolstoy's and Thackeray's awareness of history as both a series of past events and a mode of inquiry proved the exception rather than the rule, however; most nineteenth-century historical novels adopted a relatively unproblematic and naturalized formulation of the relation between text and referent. In *Barnaby Rudge*, for example, Dickens proposed an analogy between his microcosmic fictional world and that in which the actual Gordon riots occurred. Thus Gabriel Varden exemplifies the stable and nonalienated craftsman; Sim Tappertit, the borderline lumpenproletarian; the older Chester, the decadent gentility; the idiot Barnaby, all the nameless victims of aristocratic brutality and social disorder. The George Gordon who enters the book is a thoroughly despicable creature. Employing a bolder satiric pen than Scott or Cooper, Dickens stresses the tragic social consequences of the pride and greed of the declining aristocracy. But, even in its partiality toward the popular forces typified by Varden, *Barnaby Rudge* effects an ideological resolution fully assimilable to bourgeois liberalism. The enormity of Gordon's historical crimes is muted by Dickens's attribution of the novel's key historical acts to Gordon's fictitious accomplice George Gashford, who is depicted as manipulating the anti-Papist riots—and Gordon himself—in order to satisfy his own hunger for power. The marginalization of the ac-

<sup>20</sup>Thackeray, xxxv.

tual historical figure thus lessens the burden of historical blame: documentation mutes the force of historical assertion at the same time that it anchors the text in a known public actuality. Dickens thus successfully encompasses social contradictions within the framework of a petty bourgeois meliorism. Joe Willett marries Dolly Varden, receives from the king a silver snuff box as a reward for his role in containing the riots, and assumes proprietorship of the Maypole Inn, which, nodding in its sleep at the end as at the start of the narrative, symbolizes the accommodation of England's most venerable institutions to the incursions of struggle and change.

In one historical novel after another, this paradigm repeats itself. Characters constitute a microcosmic portrayal of representative social types; they experience complications and conflicts that embody important tendencies in historical development; one or more world-historical figures enters the fictive world, lending an aura of extratextual validation to the text's generalizations and judgments; the conclusion reaffirms the legitimacy of a norm that transforms social and political conflict into moral debate. When the novel addresses domestic crises, as in *Barnaby Rudge*, the depiction of warring historical forces takes on real urgency, for the author must acknowledge the full dimension of the conflict that precedes resolution and synthesis. Heightened ideological contradiction mediates an intensification of social contradiction in the referent. In *The Pioneers* and *Waverley*, the authorial conscience reluctantly accedes—but accedes nonetheless—to the defeat of the Highlanders or the extermination of the Indians; in *Barnaby Rudge*, it can less readily come to terms with the subordination of a proletarian class that can hardly be seen as a vanishing race. Nonetheless, in all these novels the informing ideological perspective is that of an emergent and then consolidated liberalism, which claims to encapsulate universal human aspirations and needs in the synecdochic figure of the bourgeois hero. The text's documentary apparatus, presumably providing from extratextual sources an empirical validation for the generalizations the fiction implies, lapses into a positivist invocation of factuality that legitimates the text's informing assumptions.

The tendency toward this sort of empiricist rubber-stamping became especially pronounced in the later part of the century, when the historical novel came to assume stature as a quasi-official genre in its own right. An early instance of this development is contained in

George Eliot's *Romola*, which serves as a kind of bridge between fictions deriving from the tradition of Scott and later antiquarian fictions abandoning the classical historical novelist's aspiration to portray historical processes as what Lukács called "the concrete precondition of the present."<sup>21</sup> In *Romola*, Eliot grapples with the critical shifts in consciousness that accompany a transitional historical moment; the decaying marriage of Romola and Tito illustrates the deeply divisive nature of the debate over the religious and secular basis of ethics, a debate articulating the contradictory tendencies toward medieval asceticism and Renaissance individualism in fifteenth-century Florence. Eliot's morbid Savonarola effectively shapes the terms of this debate, for his initial appeal to Romola's moral nature is superseded by her—and the reader's—realization of the social cost that his fanaticism entails.

Despite its careful reconstruction of fifteenth-century backdrops and debates, however, *Romola*'s historicity is in many ways superficial. As Eliot comments in the introductory "Proem," the "eternal marriage of love and duty" is her principal theme; "We still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them,"<sup>22</sup> she declares. As more than one critic has noted, there is something anachronistic about Eliot's protagonist: despite her situation in a carefully etched environment, her consciousness is peculiarly modern, more akin to that of Browning's Victorianized Renaissance people than to a plausible fifteenth-century psychology.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore significant that, in formulating her protagonist's final endorsement of a Comtian "religion of humanity," Eliot finds it necessary to leave behind the historical world of Florence, transporting Romola to a village suffering from the plague, where the problems of humanity appear sub specie aeternitatis and Savoronola is suddenly strangely irrelevant. Noting that these closing episodes were "by deliberate forecast adopted as romantic and symbolical elements," Eliot was apparently aware that the analogous configuration constructed around Romola's Florentine ca-

<sup>21</sup>Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 21.

<sup>22</sup>George Eliot, *Romola* (1863; London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2, 9.

<sup>23</sup>See, for example, Fleishman, 124, and Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840–1880* (London: Macmillan, 1968), 168–96. Sanders declares, "[Eliot] is not concerned to show how the past has moulded the present, but that history can be alive to us, through our awakened awareness of the 'internal conditions' of the men of the past." She plants "a nineteenth-century seed in a fifteenth-century soul" (174, 176–177). The statement by Eliot that I quote below appears in Sanders, 191.

reer could not bear the weight of the text's moral resolution; hence the critical determination of her fate apart from historical process. The transcendental subjectivity that, in the classical historical novel, is restricted to the author's vantage point, now becomes a property of the protagonist. Despite her dense contextualization, *Romola* is an essentially private being, and her discovery of moral order constitutes a peculiarly modern "separate peace."

The departure from historical imagination implied in the conclusion to *Romola* becomes a headlong retreat from the historical process in most later nineteenth-century historical fiction. In the last decades of the century, the historical novel dons a flamboyant costumery. While it appears still committed to the concrete representation of a past actuality, its conception of historical development has become increasingly abstract. In Lew. Wallace's *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* and Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô*, for example, there is little attempt to present character and event as issuing from the contradictions of the historical dialectic; history is no longer the "concrete precondition of the present," but a remote and exotic ground for the incarnation of religious truths and timeless human passions. The text's referential relation to historical actuality is thus undergirded by what might be termed a "pseudoempiricism": the corroborative "facts" make no pretense to verifiable factuality. *Ben Hur* bristles with photographs of the modern Holy Land, but these only enhance the reader's sense of the text's separation from the referent. A nineteenth-century Bedouin standing by a camel in front of a ruined Crusader castle provides a curious sort of corroboration for the text's propositional claim that Jesus Christ actually walked the earth and performed miracles. In *Salammbô*, Flaubert undertakes a similarly "archaeological" (the phrase is Sainte-Beuve's)<sup>24</sup> representation of the past. Flaubert repudiates the one ancient source detailing the Punic war upon which the novel is based: "Hanno's *Periplus* is hateful to me," he declared; it is "a subject for [dissertation] theses." Flaubert thus engages in a reconstruction of past events that is patently invented from beginning to end. Replying to Sainte-Beuve's complaint that *Salammbô* was too "fantastical," Flaubert remarked that his "empirical" reconstruction

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Gustave Flaubert, *Salammbô* (1862), trans. J. S. Chartres (London: J. M. Dent, 1931), 305. Flaubert's responses appear on pp. 311–19. The quotation from Flaubert appears on p. 312.

of physical details was as accurate as possible. Hanno's account was, however, too close to the events it described to provide an objective basis for historical reconstruction. Apparently the novelist's transcendental presence is best able to tell the truth about the Punic wars if it frees itself entirely from the trammels of documentary testimony.

Flaubert's mode of historical reconstruction mystifies the past and closes it off from the present. Usually such antiquarianism does not imply a particular political agenda. The plantation novels of Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, however, exemplify one kind of particularly distasteful polemic that could be veiled in historical costumery. Portraying the defeat of Reconstruction as the triumph of those who, Page tells us in his preface, "reconquered their section and preserved the civilization of the Anglo-Saxon,"<sup>25</sup> Page sets his *Red Rock* in a peculiarly mythic environment, "somewhere in that vague region partly in one of the old Southern States and partly in the yet vaguer land of Memory"—a realm where "sincerity dwells and the heart still rules—the realm of old-time courtesy and high breeding." In *Red Rock*, nostalgia constitutes an apology for slavery. The documentary preface makes no pretension to anchor the text in a continuing historical dialectic but instead asserts the superiority of a vanished past. In the preface to *The Clansman*, which makes a more decisive claim to historicity (the abolitionist father of the pure white heroine is a veiled representation of Thaddeus Stevens), Dixon testifies to the veracity of his tale: "The men who enact the drama of fierce revenge into which I have woven a double love-story are historical figures," he declares. "I have merely changed their names without taking a liberty with any essential historic fact."<sup>26</sup> He follows this empiricist claim with a peculiar sort of corroborative argument:

In the darkest hour of the life of the South, when her wounded people lay helpless amid rags and ashes under the beak and talon of the vulture, suddenly from the mist of the mountains appeared a white cloud the size of a man's hand. It grew until its mantle of mystery unfolded the stricken earth and sky. An "Invisible Empire" had risen from the field of Death and challenged the Visible to mortal combat.

<sup>25</sup>Thomas Nelson Page, *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction*, in *The Works of Thomas Nelson Page* (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 4:vii, ix, xi.

<sup>26</sup>Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1905), v–vi.

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When references to rags and ashes, beaks and talons, and white clouds from the realm of the Invisible authenticate a text's claim to historicity, we clearly have come some distance from the mode of the classical historical novel. Where Scott used corroborative detail to reinforce the explanatory claims of his text, Page and Dixon repudiate even the pretense of empiricism. Where Scott at least attempted to delineate the contradictory social and political forces informing his referent, Page and Dixon confine their representations of the South to selected sets of characters whose claims to typicality rest on a patently spurious racial stereotypicality.<sup>27</sup> *Waverley* signals the discursive concerns of a progressive liberalism that envisions in pluralism a genuine resolution to contradiction. *Red Rock* and *The Clansman*, by contrast, treat historical dialectic as coterminous with racial destiny. The "Invisible Empire" of the "vanished race" becomes the locus of all value, and the "visible" realm of an emergent historical race is assaulted with all the weapons that pseudoempiricism can muster.

If some novelists in the late nineteenth century directed their attention to a mythical past, others—ordinarily of a much more progressive political inclination—postponed the assignation of historical significance to a distant future. The late nineteenth century witnessed a revival of utopian novels, in which authors came to terms with the harsh realities of their time by constructing ideal worlds in which these difficulties had been overcome. For example, Edward Bellamy, in *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, reacted to the strikes and financial panics of his day not by exploring their roots in the configuration of past class struggle but by positing a world in which such occurrences would be no longer conceivable. Indeed, in one sense Bellamy achieved an apotheosis of the liberal conception of progress, since his utopia is attained without the loss of a drop of blood, through the exercise of reason and parliamentary democracy. Yet the labor process—the battleground of the old society—is hidden from view in the new society, and commodities magically pop out of tubes from central warehouses. Moreover, the exemplary citizens of the future, the Leete family, are distinctly anachronistic projections, since their undisturbed, middle-class gentility negates the transformation of human personality that would accompany any genuine transformation

<sup>27</sup>For more on the relation of racism to typicality and stereotypicality, see below, Chapter 8.

## The Historical Novel

of the social relations of production. For all its socialist proclivities, *Looking Backward* projects a fundamental fear of the actual nature of historical change; its exhaustive descriptions of industrial armies and communal kitchens lack grounding in a commensurate grasp of the dynamics of class conflict. Indeed, Bellamy closely resembles the “Socialistic bourgeois” whom Marx and Engels ridiculed in *The Communist Manifesto*—that is, those reformers who “want all the advantages of modern social conditions without the struggles and dangers necessarily resulting therefrom. They desire the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements. They wish for a bourgeoisie without a proletariat.”<sup>28</sup>

Posing itself as an exemplary fiction written for the enlightenment of citizens of the twenty-first century, *Looking Backward* occupies a peculiar relation to the tradition of the documentary novel. Knowing that his readers cannot possess an experience to which the text can correspond by analogy, Bellamy somewhat playfully posits this readership in the future. Presenting his text as Julian West’s autobiographical reminiscence, Bellamy remarks in an “author’s” preface:

Living as we do in the closing year of the twentieth century, enjoying the blessings of a social order at once so simple and logical that it seems but the triumph of common sense, it is no doubt difficult for those whose studies have not been largely historical to realize that the present organization of society is, in its completeness, less than a century old. The object of this volume is to assist persons who, while desiring to gain a more definitive idea of the social contrasts between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are daunted by the formal aspect of the histories which treat the subject.<sup>29</sup>

This strategem circumvents but cannot finally avoid the question of historical reference. Bellamy carefully avoids reference to events in the class struggle of the 1880s that would locate his utopia in a continuing historical dialectic; the novel’s reconcretization of its referent eschews any documentary invocation of extratextual actualities of Bellamy’s own time.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 496.

<sup>29</sup>Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888; New York: New American Library, 1960), xxi.

<sup>30</sup>I do not mean to imply that all the time-traveling novels of the 1880s and 1890s—utopian or otherwise—were as fetishistic and idealist as *Looking Backward*. Mark Twain’s *A*

*The Naturalistic Novel*

There is a peculiar paucity of documentary references to actual historical persons and events in the historical novel of the late nineteenth century. Curiously enough, this sort of nonspecific referentiality is also a distinctive feature of the exhaustive reportage of the naturalistic novel. At first, this may seem an anomalous claim, since the naturalistic novel, with its passion for encyclopedic portraiture, would seem to exemplify the documentary novel in its purest form. If, however, we take “documentary” as denoting a specified invocation of data known to exist in an extratextual reality, we see that the naturalistic novel in fact participates in the same reluctance to anchor fiction in a known actuality that characterizes contemporaneous works of historical fiction.

Edmond de Goncourt made a revealing statement of purpose in his preface to *Les frères Zemganno*. “The novel,” he advocated, should be “made with documents narrated or selected from nature, just as history is based on written documents.”<sup>31</sup> Working-class people, he continued, “can be captured only through an immense storing up of observation, by innumerable notes taken through a lorgnette, by the amassment of a collection of *human documents*, like those heaps of pocket sketches which, assembled at a painter’s death, represent his life-time of work.” There is a curious logic here. First, the writer asserts that fiction must possess a “documentary” base; he is supremely conscious of his sociological mission. But Goncourt does not specify exactly what the naturalistic novelist’s “documents” actually are, nor how these are to be differentiated from the “written documents” on which the historian relies. And yet these “human documents” consist of “an immense storing up of observations, by innumerable *notes*” (italics added). How can these “documents” be both unwritten and written? The answer is, of course, that his “documents” are written

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*Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) undertakes a fairly earthy and concrete examination of the theme of historical progress, and William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1891) does not shy away from representing the role of class struggle in producing “visionary” change. Nonetheless, even these novels evade a direct confrontation with the historicity of the present and the recent past: historical process is, significantly, displaced to distant centuries.

<sup>31</sup>Edmond de Goncourt, Preface to *Les frères Zemganno* (1879), reprinted in George Becker, ed., *Documents in Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 245–46.

by the author; they are not borrowed from the public fund from which historians draw their data. This invocation of an absent authority points to the peculiar nature of the naturalistic novel's empiricist claims. The naturalistic novel purports to replicate and expose social conditions with scientific objectivity, yet it offers no documentary guarantee that the text's mediation between referent and analogous configuration is validated by extratextual realities. The dialectic between evidence and generalization informing the epistemology of the classical historical novel—however tautological this relation may be—has been superseded by a positivist epistemology positing the unmediated *equivalence* of document and fact, extratextual reality and intratextual representation. Despite its frequently radical commitment to demystifying and exposing existing social and economic relations (in the preface to *Germinie Lacerteux*, the Goncourt brothers “ask . . . whether what one calls ‘the lower classes’ have no right to the novel”),<sup>32</sup> the naturalistic novel is guided by a distinctly conservative epistemology.

Naturalistic novelists thus generally repudiated any kind of testimonial apparatus and offered their texts as authoritative representations. There are no prefaces, postscripts, or footnotes accompanying texts such as *The Pit*, *Germinal*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Sister Carrie*, and *The Financier*, even though these texts are grounded in personal experience or careful research and could very easily be anchored in extratextual reality. These texts are intended to represent their referents by analogous configuration, and analogous configuration alone; even within the totalizing framework of fictionality, indeed, they characteristically avoid reference to specific historical events. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, for example, Crane omits all mention of the actual Battle of Chancellorsville, on which his narration is based. His intent is to reveal the biological roots of human behavior, and Henry Fleming's heroic aspirations have no historical specificity. They reenact, indeed, the futile attempt of human consciousness to escape from the trap of biological instinct (poor Henry Fleming is, all within one page, a “jaded horse,” a “rabbit,” and a “proverbial chicken”)<sup>33</sup> from the time of the ancient “Greek-like

<sup>32</sup>Edmond de Goncourt and Julius de Goncourt, quoted in Alan Swingewood, *The Novel and Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 59.

<sup>33</sup>Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*, in *Great Short Works of Stephen Crane* (1895; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 39–40.

struggle” to the present. In *Germinal*, Zola even goes so far as to distort nineteenth-century political developments in order to enhance his representation of the emergence of the revolutionary proletariat as a Darwinian necessity. Projecting back into class struggles of the 1860s a political battle between anarchism, evolutionary socialism, and Marxist revolutionism that acquired significance only in the 1880s, Zola attained sociological exactitude only at the expense of historical anachronism.<sup>34</sup> For all its apocalyptic force, then, there is a strangely timeless quality in Zola’s closing prophecy: “Men were springing forth, a black avenging army, germinating slowly in the furrows, growing towards the harvests of the next century, and this generation would soon overturn the earth.”<sup>35</sup> Class struggle is, it seems, a natural force, having little to do with the political course that the proletariat will choose to follow. In *The Financier*, Dreiser omits all reference to the actual Charles Yerkes, on whose career Dreiser based his saga of Frank Cowperwood. Even though, as with the Gillette case in *An American Tragedy*, whole pages of the Yerkes trial transcript have been incorporated into the narration, these materials are presented as part of the analogous configuration; the text provides the reader with no signal that its reconcretized materials replicate the particulars of the referent.<sup>36</sup>

The generic contract accompanying the naturalistic novel thus requires the reader to focus on the configuration of the events portrayed, even when the reader may sense that many details of the text also possess an independent referential power of their own. The novel insists upon the pervasiveness of the conditions it represents, and the reader is not permitted to dismiss the story as a retelling of events that may be bizarre or atypical, with no broader social signification. At times, the naturalistic novel’s denial of its grounding in particular lives powerfully reinforces its generalized assertions. The protagonist of *Sister Carrie*, for example, is not simply a fictional replication of Dreiser’s sister but a wholly plausible character whose fate necessi-

<sup>34</sup>See Richard H. Zakarian, *Zola’s “Germinal”: A Critical Study of Its Primary Sources* (Geneva: Droz, 1972), 143–44.

<sup>35</sup>Emile Zola, *Germinal* (1885), trans. Havelock Ellis (New York: Knopf, 1925), 472.

<sup>36</sup>For more on Dreiser’s incorporation of documentary materials into his novels, see Haskell Block, *Naturalistic Triptych: The Fictive and the Real in Zola, Mann, and Dreiser* (New York: Random House, 1970), 54–77. Even though Dreiser placed about thirty pages of trial testimony and letters in the final portion of *An American Tragedy*, Block argues, “the poignant and arresting portrayal of character in moments of crisis forcefully asserts the dominance of the fictive over the real in Dreiser’s art” (67).

tates a trenchant judgment on the economics of sexual morality. The commodity fetishism pervading Carrie's world would reduce her, like the other shop girls, to the status of a thing: Dreiser's totalizing portraiture of her fate and his insistence upon her typicality constitute a compelling critique of capitalist dehumanization. At the same time that it emphasizes the broad application of the truth it tells, however, the naturalistic novel runs the risk of presenting social conflicts as natural phenomena and therefore of denying the historical specificity of its referent. If the Battle of Chancellorsville is all wars, if the struggle between miners and capitalists exemplifies the germination and harvest of a natural necessity that will "overturn the earth," if Cowperwood's career enacts the struggle of the fittest to survive, then what is the possible role of conscious agency in the historical process? Is there a particularity to the configuration of natural necessity at any given historical juncture? The lack of any documentary apparatus presuming to ground the naturalistic novel's assertions in an extratextual reality provides a telling index to the mechanistic determinism guiding the process of mimetic abstraction and reconcretization, for the inclusion of references to public figures and events is a constant reminder to the reader that history is the product of human acts. Even if it simplifies and distorts these acts by positing the embodiment of national destiny in the typical hero, the historical novel treats the intersection of individual praxis with forces beyond individual agency. By contrast, the naturalistic novel's omission of historically specific documentation—particularly in novels representing actual public events and personages, such as *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Financier*—produces a curiously static effect. The view of history as nature, which departs through the front door of the historical novel in the early decades of the nineteenth century, reenters through the back. In short, the many sociological particulars in the naturalistic novel do not produce historically specific cognition. Rather, they reproduce re-recognition of a reality that, in its underlying laws and epiphenomenal features, is assumed already to be known.

### *Empiricism and Positivism in Nineteenth-Century Historiography*

As it moves through the various phases I have described here, the documentary novel of the nineteenth century mediates the conceptual

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abstractions of a now-confident empiricism. Speaking of the assumptions guiding the practice of nineteenth-century realism, George Levine remarks, “In requiring the validation of imagination in the visible world, . . . realism posits a tension between imagination . . . and reality. Values are reversed in that the realistic method proceeds to what is not visible—the principles of order and meaning—through the visible; the *a priori* now requires validation.”<sup>37</sup> Where the pseudofactual novel only partially signals “principles of order and meaning” through the documentary “validation” of the “visible,” the historical novel invokes a contract presupposing the reader’s endorsement of an empiricist epistemology. As even the best historical novels move toward costumery in the last decades of the century, however, and the task of documenting quotidian realities passes to the naturalistic novel, the “tension between imagination . . . and reality” collapses. The hypostatization of subject and object mediates the transition of empiricism into positivism: fact becomes coterminous with law, and the transcendental observer is absorbed into the object of perception.

Empiricist assumptions permeated many areas of nineteenth-century intellectual activity, but perhaps few as fully as historiography. If we seek to understand the conceptual abstractions shaping the representational strategy of the historical novel, it is useful to analyze the paradigms guiding contemporaneous historical writing, particularly since historians and novelists of the time were quite explicit about their mutual influences. Macaulay, for instance, acknowledging his indebtedness to Scott, stated that

the perfect historian is he in whose work the character and spirit of an age is [*sic*] exhibited in miniature. . . . By judicious selection, rejection, and arrangement, he gives to truth those attractions which have been usurped by fiction. Sir Walter Scott, in the same manner, has used those fragments of truth which historians have scornfully thrown behind them in a manner which may well excite their envy. . . . But a truly great historian would reclaim those materials which the novelist has appropriated.<sup>38</sup>

Thackeray modeled *Henry Esmond* on Macaulay’s historical narratives and enviously exclaimed, “It takes as much trouble as Macaulays [*sic*]

<sup>37</sup>Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, 18.

<sup>38</sup>Thomas Babington Macaulay, “History,” in *Critical and Historical Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), 1:236.

History almost and he has the vast advantage of remembering everything he has read, whilst everything but impressions I mean facts dates & so forth slip out of his head.”<sup>39</sup> Parkman constructed his frontiersman after the model of Natty Bumppo, who, he remarked, seems “so palpable and real” that “the reader might in some moods of mind . . . easily confound” Cooper’s hero with “memories of his own experiences.”<sup>40</sup> Carlyle’s depiction of the French Revolution as a fiery moral drama was clearly a central subtext for *A Tale of Two Cities*; his writings on the role of “representative men” exercised a widespread influence upon Victorian novelists treating historical themes. Yet Carlyle, in turn, drew much of his inspiration from Scott: “Bygone ages of the world were actually filled by living men, not by protocols, state-papers, controversies, and abstractions of men.” Carlyle wrote:

Not abstractions were they, not diagrams or theorems; but men, in buff or other coats and breeches, with colour in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach, and the idioms, features, and vitalities of very men. [History’s] faint hearsays of “teaching by experience” will have to exchange themselves everywhere for direct inspection and embodiment; this, and this only, will be counted experience. . . . It is a great service, . . . this that Scott has done; a great truth laid open by him.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, writers in each genre seem to value in their counterparts in the other the ability to clarify the experiential relation between fact and generalization. Macaulay lauds Scott for his seizing upon abandoned “fragments and truth” and calls upon historians to

<sup>39</sup>William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945–46), 3:38.

<sup>40</sup>Francis Parkman, “James Fenimore Cooper,” in *Essays from the North American Review*, ed. Allan Thorndike Rice (New York, 1879), 358–62.

<sup>41</sup>Thomas Carlyle, “Sir Walter Scott,” in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1888), 3:214–15. Carlyle was, however, very much biased toward historical forms of discourse. As he exclaimed in his “Biography,” “Consider but the whole class of Fictitious Narrative; from the highest category of epic or dramatic Poetry, in Shakespeare and Homer, down to the lowest of froth Prose, in the Fashionable Novel. What are these but so many mimic Biographies? . . . Let anyone bethink him how impressive the smallest historical fact may become, as contrasted with the grandest *fictitious event*; what an invaluable force lies for us in this consideration: The Thing which I here hold imaged in my mind did actually occur; was, in very Truth, an element in the system of the All, whereof I too form a part; had therefore, and has, through all time, an authentic being; is not a dream, but a reality!” (100, 106).

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use “selection, rejection, and arrangement” of their materials so as similarly to exhibit “in miniature” the “spirit of an age.” Parkman praises Natty Bumppo for seeming “so palpable and real.” Carlyle praises Scott for his “direct inspection and embodiment” of experience. Thackeray chides himself for losing track of the “facts dates and so forth” that render Macaulay’s “impressions” so valuable. It would seem that novelists and historians are engaged in comparable empiricist enterprises; interestingly, when the novel has staked out its claim as a distinctive mode of cognition, it then can grant its indebtedness to—rather than simply simulate—other kinds of writing.

If Scott is most frequently mentioned as an influence by novelists and historians, Hegel’s writings most clearly set forth the assumptions guiding both fictional and historical depictions of historical process in the nineteenth century. Rejecting the dominant eighteenth-century notion that history is governed by either universal “unchanging laws” or “providence,” Hegel argued that “World-history . . . represents the rationally necessary course of the World Spirit, the Spirit whose nature is indeed always one and the same, but whose one nature unfolds in the course of the world.”<sup>42</sup> The universal thus manifests itself in the succession of distinct particulars: “Every age has conditions of its own and is an individual situation; decisions can and must be made only within, and in accordance with, the age itself.” History’s actors exercise a freedom generated by the contradictions internal to the historical moment, but they work within the limits of a necessity external to subjective will. The “manifestations of vitality on the part of individuals and peoples in which they seek and satisfy their own purposes are, at the same time, the means and tools of a higher and broader purpose of which they know nothing, which they realize unconsciously.” In Hegel’s philosophy of history, people are at once the subjects and the objects of historical process. Where the Cartesian ego cogitans contemplated the world from a detached and ahistorical vantage point, the Hegelian subject is dialectically involved with a changing object of contemplation. The Spirit hovers over historical actuality, then, but its “manifestations of vitality” are necessarily concretized in agents who follow its dictates of their own volition.

Hegel’s conception of the dialectical emergence of Reason had both

<sup>42</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1822), trans. Robert Hartman (New York: Liberal Arts, 1953), 12. The passages quoted below appear on pp. 8, 31, 39, and 54.

revolutionary and conservative implications. On the one hand, the “inner development of the Idea” generates “momentous collisions between existing, acknowledged duties, laws, and rights and those possibilities which are adverse to this [established] system, violate it, and even destroy its foundations and existence.” The state of nature posited by eighteenth-century philosophers was, he declared, “one of those nebulous images which theory produces . . . . Freedom . . . does not *exist* as original and natural. It must first be acquired and won.” Attacking the atomistic and static presuppositions of early bourgeois political theory, Hegel posited the necessity of struggle and change. On the other hand, Hegel’s conception of the Idea was readily assimilable to the hegemony of the bourgeois world order. Proposing that the stages in the development of Spirit are embodied in “world-historical national Spirits,” he argued that national spirit was in turn embodied in the state, which he designated as “the externally existing, genuinely moral life.” The recognition that the Spirit must be concretized in order to be Real meant, in practical terms, a very premature concretion in the self-evident—that is, the Prussian state. The motion within essence is, for Hegel, “the moment of becoming and of transition which remains within itself.” Describing the tension of the historical dialectic as a feature of pure Spirit, Hegel thus subdued the potentially revolutionary aspects of his dialectic to the political imperatives of bourgeois nationalism. Calling upon philosophers to grant the contradictoriness of natural and social processes, Hegel himself projected a contradiction that locates him squarely within the ideological nexus of emergent capitalism.

Hegel’s dialectical conception of history profoundly influenced the narratives of Romantic and Victorian historians. First, they recognized the centrality of conflict to historical process and celebrated the role of the masses. Thus Michelet declared that the history of humankind was the history of “interminable struggle” and stressed the subordinate role of “brilliant, powerful speakers” in the “drama” of history. Probing into the archives of the Commune, he concluded, “The chief actor is the people. In order to find and restore the latter to its proper position, I have been obliged to reduce to their proportions those ambitious puppets whom they have set in motion and in whom till now, people have fancied they saw . . . the secret transactions of history.”<sup>43</sup> Carlyle warned that “hunger, nakedness and righteous

<sup>43</sup>Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution* (1847–53), trans. Charles Cocks, ed. Gordon Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1:12.

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oppression lying heavy on 25 million hearts; this, not the wounded vanities or contradicted philosophies of philosophical advocates, rich shopkeepers, rural noblesse, was the prime mover in the French revolution; as the like will be in all such revolutions, in all countries.”<sup>44</sup> Bancroft, in his *History of the United States*, treated Daniel Boone as a prototype of the whole class of woodsmen, rather than as an isolated heroic agent. Motley declared of William of Orange that “the whole nation thought with his thoughts, and spoke with his words.”<sup>45</sup>

Second, nineteenth-century historiography often crossed the fine line between the argument that historical process creates its heroes and the proposition that history’s powerful are the chosen arbiters of national destiny. Just as Hegel’s Idea found its concrete apotheosis in the nationalist design of the Prussian state, Macaulay complacently envisioned the reign of Victoria as the culmination of England’s development toward liberty, an interpretation that merely codified the Whig interpretation of history. “The history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement,” he declared. “No man who is correctly informed as to the past will be disposed to take a morose or desponding view of the present.”<sup>46</sup> Motley believed in the “inexorable law of Freedom and Progress”;<sup>47</sup> Prescott and Bancroft characterized as politically—even biologically—retrograde all those nations and peoples that presumably retarded the fulfillment of the Teutonic or Anglo-Saxon historical mission. Thus, in *The Conquest of Mexico*, Prescott saw an irresistible march of destiny in Cortez’s defeat of the decadent civilization of Montezuma, while Bancroft stated that it was the “strong tendency to individuality and freedom” that allowed the “Teutonic race” to “become the master from the Gulf of Mexico to the poles.”<sup>48</sup> Even Carlyle, despite his sympathetic de-

<sup>44</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* (1837; London: Chapman & Hall, 1888), 3:140.

<sup>45</sup>John Lothrop Motley, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1855), quoted in David Levin, *History as Romantic Art: Bancroft, Prescott, Motley, and Parkman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 50.

<sup>46</sup>Macaulay, *The Life and Works of Lord Macaulay* (London: Longmans, Green, 1898), 1:2.

<sup>47</sup>Motley, “Historic Progress as American Democracy,” in *John Lothrop Motley: Representative Selections*, ed. C. P. Higby and B. T. Schantz (New York: American Book, 1939), 105.

<sup>48</sup>George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1862–75), 4:456.

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scription of the class oppression that erupted in the French Revolution, eventually favored the side of bourgeois right. As Engels remarked of Carlyle in disgust,

All real class conflicts, for all their variety in various periods, are finally resolved into the one great, eternal conflict, between those who have fathomed the eternal law of nature and act in keeping with it, the wise and noble, and those who misunderstand it, distort it, and act against it, the fools and the rogues. . . .

The trump card in all [Carlyle's] attacks on bourgeois relations and ideas is the apotheosis of the bourgeois individual.<sup>49</sup>

It should be evident that historical novelists and historians of the nineteenth century founded their narratives on certain common ideological presuppositions. The novel was constructed around the typical hero, whereas the history focused upon the activities of "great men"; yet both held that "representative men" could successfully embody the contradictions of their historical moments. Scott's depiction of Waverley's hesitation between Rose and Flora thus has its analogue in Bancroft's assertion that "the trials of Washington are the dark, solemn ground on which the beautiful work of his country's salvation was embroidered."<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the novelist's treatment of the formal problems of resolution and closure bore a marked resemblance to the historian's narrative rendition of the theme of progress: Scott's marriage of Waverley to Rose has its counterpart in Motley's celebration of the defeat of Spanish decadence by Dutch resourcefulness. The novelist generalized upon the private, whereas the historian personalized the public, but the effect is the same: character emerges as a Hegelian concrete universal, but it also takes on inevitably class-bound qualities. Antagonistic historical forces were not so opposed, it seemed, that they could not be incarnated in the career of a single synecdochic individual, and the unfolding of national destiny superseded the conflict of opposed classes. As David Levin shrewdly remarks of the American Romantic historians, "Whatever value facts had for their own sake, it was the story, and the kind of story, that counted."<sup>51</sup> The "story" was the triumph of liberal nationalism, and

<sup>49</sup>Marx and Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress, 1976), 333, 336.

<sup>50</sup>Bancroft, 9:218.

<sup>51</sup>Levin, 22.

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the “facts” chosen to validate it *a posteriori* were carefully subordinated to its informing teleology.

The so-called scientific historians of the later nineteenth century castigated their forebears for what Homer Hockett called the “appetite for literary effects.”<sup>52</sup> “The substance of all science,” wrote Taine, consists in “little facts that are well chosen, important, and significant.”<sup>53</sup> Taine’s little significant fact became almost as notorious as Ranke’s dictum that the historian’s task is to recount “what really happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). George Burton Adams echoed Ranke when he urged his colleagues to “ascertain as nearly as possible and to record exactly what happened.”<sup>54</sup> Frederic Harrison envisioned the accurate collocation of data as the supreme accomplishment of the historian: “If there is one thing which, more than another, is the mark of Oxford today, it is the belief in contemporary documents, exact testimony of authorities, scrupulous verification of citations, minute attention to chronology, geography, paleography, and inscriptions. When all these are right, you cannot go wrong.”<sup>55</sup> This description contrasts sharply with Parkman’s declaration that “the task of exploring archives and collecting documents” was “repulsive at best.”<sup>56</sup>

The positivist orientation of the scientific historians is unmistakable: facts speak for themselves, laws emerge from the dispassionate survey of facts, and the historian’s task is to be a neutral facilitator of the connection between the two. It seems obvious to us now that this project was doomed in advance. It was, of course, impossible for historians to eliminate their own perspectives. Taine may have declared that “the movements of the spiritual automaton which is our being are governed by laws to the same extent as those of the material world in which it is contained,”<sup>57</sup> but this proclamation of neutrality did not prevent him from branding the leaders of the French Revolu-

<sup>52</sup>Homer Hockett, “The Literary Motive in the Writing of History,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 12 (1926): 476.

<sup>53</sup>Hippolyte Taine, *De l'intelligence*, 16th ed. (Paris: Hachette, n.d.), 1:2, my translation.

<sup>54</sup>George Burton Adams, quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Random House, 1968), 38.

<sup>55</sup>Frederick Harrison, *The Meaning of History* (1893; London, 1902), 118–38.

<sup>56</sup>Francis Parkman, quoted in Charles H. Farnham, *Life of Francis Parkman* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1900), 331n.

<sup>57</sup>Taine, quoted in Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (1940; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), 63, 59.

tion as a “race of crocodiles.” In fact, the scientific historians’ posture of objectivity routinely masked a complacent conservatism. Michelet freely admitted that his *Introduction to Universal History* had been composed “on the burning pavements” of Paris.<sup>58</sup> Comte, by contrast, suppressed the personal voice in his discourse but proclaimed that “the positive spirit tends to consolidate order, by a rational development of a wise resignation to incurable political evils. A true resignation . . . can proceed from a deep sense of the connection of all kinds of natural phenomena with invariable natural laws.”<sup>59</sup> As Charles Beard noted of Ranke, “Written history that was cold, factual and apparently undisturbed by the passions of the time served best the cause of those who did not want to be disturbed.”<sup>60</sup>

The positivist epistemology upon which the scientific historians relied did not simply mask political conservatism in a specious objectivity; it also ultimately mystified the very historical processes that it set out to describe with scientific rigor. Comte conceded that there was an epistemological limitation to the enterprise of the scientific investigator, who “recognizes the impossibility of reaching an absolute understanding, and abandons the search for the destination of the universe and the inmost causes of phenomena.”<sup>61</sup> Where Marx saw in the greasy sausages distributed by Louis Napoleon both the actual evidence of bribery and the ironic symbolic embodiment of the bourgeois bid for imperial grandeur, Taine consigned to metaphysics “research into first causes.” Phenomena have only an apparent reality, concluded Taine. “Basically, there exist only abstractions, universal principles of general cases that appear to us as particulars.”<sup>62</sup> Renan argued that his scientific approach to the history of religion would simply replace religious faith with a “faith which believes in the ideal without the need of belief in the supernatural, and which . . . sees the divinity better in the immutable order of things than in derogations from the eternal order.”<sup>63</sup> John Stuart Mill posited that the “phae-

<sup>58</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>59</sup>Auguste Comte, quoted in Swingewood, 9n.

<sup>60</sup>Charles Beard, “Written History as an Act of Faith,” in *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff (Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor, 1959), 142.

<sup>61</sup>Comte, *Cours de la philosophie positive* (Paris: J. Bailli  re, 1864), 1:9, my translation.

<sup>62</sup>Taine, Hippolyte Taine: *S   vie et sa correspondance, 1902-07*, quoted in D. G. Charlton, *Positivist Thought in France during the Second Empire, 1852-70* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 148, my translation.

<sup>63</sup>Ernest Renan, *Studies of Religious History* (London: Heinemann, 1893), xxvi.

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nomena” that furnish the object of scientific inquiry are opaque and static, precluding any access to determinate knowledge:

We have no knowledge of anything but Phaenomena; and our knowledge of phaenomena is relative, not absolute. We know not the essence, nor the real mode of production, of any fact, but only its relations to other facts in the way of succession or of similitude. These relations are constant; that is, always the same in the same circumstances. The constant resemblances which link phaenomena together, and the constant sequences which unite them as antecedent and consequent, are termed their laws. The laws of phaenomena are all we know respecting them. Their essential nature, and their ultimate causes, either efficient or final, are unknown and inscrutable to us.<sup>64</sup>

For all its aspiration to render a materialist description of phenomena, the positivist program led to a new metaphysics of essence.

The positivist epistemology that shapes the practice of the scientific historians is the same one that shapes the picture of social reality in documentary novels of the late nineteenth century. Like the scientific historians, the antiquarian historical novelists and the naturalists fetishized the “little significant fact.” The detailed description of Florentine life in *Romola* and the dizzying succession of battle sequences in *The Red Badge of Courage* furnish fictive counterparts to Renan’s compendious research in *The Origins of Christianity*: presumably the reader can never learn, and the writer never tell, too much about the subject at hand, which is in fact defined as the sum of its component data. Totality is imagined to be an additive entity, so that the writer’s job is to pile up enough data until the working of a law becomes apparent. In both scientific histories and documentary fictions, however, the laws that the data are supposed to supply bear a highly problematic relation to their empirical base. In *Romola*, for example, the presence of Savonarola suggests a specific link between the dilemma facing the typical hero and larger world-historical forces. In the plot, however, his relation to Romola’s moral development remains ambiguous; her endorsement of a Comtian pragmatic humanism provides an anachronistic ideological resolution, one distinctly at odds with her represented historical experience. But if essence consists, as Renan and Mill proposed, in immutable laws, then the imposition of

<sup>64</sup>John Stuart Mill, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge, 1866), 6–8.

moral categories in vogue some four hundred years later is of little account: ultimate realities are, after all, timeless. Similarly, Crane's reliance upon an elaborate sequence of zoological metaphors to describe Henry Fleming suggest that the laws regulating Henry's behavior stem from an intrinsic biological mechanism. The particulars of the plot, in other words, assert Taine's "abstractions, universal principles of general cases." Phenomenon recapitulates law, and law springs forth from the dispassionate observation of phenomenon. The concrete is only concrete in appearance: its essence is abstract. The empiricism that would probe the meaning of the thing (the *res*) has become the positivism that affirms the structure to which the thing belongs (reification).

### *Automatism and Alienation: The Historical Novel and Industrial Capitalism*

The empiricism and positivism shaping the altering representational strategy of the documentary novel in the nineteenth century are themselves conceptual mediations of changes in the nature and degree of abstraction characterizing the social world at large. The principal development here is the emergence of industrial capitalism, which signaled the complete subordination of the production process to the automatism of capital. In the era of manufacture, we will recall, laborers still retained a residual control over the process of production, for the instruments of production, while owned by the capitalists, required deployment at the initiative of the laborer. According to Sohn-Rethel,

As long as [the artisan producer's] means of production had not actually been taken from him, no matter how heavily they were pledged to the capitalist, we still move in the era of the production relations of artisanry. . . . The manner of production and of its physical conditions were still conceived in terms of artisanry and these were basically the terms of the unity of head and hand of the artisan in person.<sup>65</sup>

With the institution of steam-powered machinery, however, the tool no longer serves to link laborers with the raw materials upon which they work. Marx observed,

<sup>65</sup>Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, 68.

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Labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather, the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself. (What holds for machinery holds likewise for the combination of human activities and the development of human intercourse.) No longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing as middle link between the object and himself; rather, he inserts the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, mastering it. He steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor.<sup>66</sup>

Accordingly, the machine enforces the complete hegemony of capital.

Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour-process, but also a process of creating surplus-value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman. But it is only in the factory system that this inversion for the first time acquires technical and palpable reality. By means of its conversion into an automation, the instrument of labour confronts the labourer, during the labour-process, in the shape of capital, of dead labour, that dominates, and pumps dry, living labour-power. *The separation of the intellectual powers of production from the manual labour, and the conversion of those powers into the might of capital over labour, is . . . finally completed by modern industry erected on the foundation of machinery.* [Italics added]

This “‘postulate of automatism’ presents itself as a feature of technology,” Sohn-Rethel observes, yet “it does not spring from technology, but arises from the capitalist production relations and is inherent in the capital control over production. It is, as it were, the condition controlling this control.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, the machine removes the last barrier between the abstractness of the exchange relation and the labor process. When workers themselves have become interchangeable parts in a production process controlled by machines and when their labor power itself has become a commodity that facilitates their insertion in this production process, then the abstract second nature of the commodity form has clearly achieved a new position of dominance.

<sup>66</sup>Marx, *Capital: A Critique on Political Economy*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (New York: International, 1967), 1:422. The statement quoted below is from p. 423.

<sup>67</sup>Sohn-Rethel, 121.

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Indeed, it is a dominance so complete as to obscure the fact of its dominance. Since all exchanges—including the exchange of labor power for a wage—are now equivalents in quality as well as quantity, the process of exploitation itself, based upon the nonequivalence of wages and labor, is shrouded in the abstractness of the exchange relation.

The concepts generated by the development of this self-regulating automatism in the “real abstraction” assume, accordingly, an added degree of abstraction. Marx’s parenthetical aside (“What holds for machinery holds likewise for the combination of human activities and the development of human intercourse”) has direct epistemological implication. Marx’s own anatomy of capital, indeed, could be seen as the fullest exemplification of the connection between material and intellectual abstractions: it was only when capital itself had achieved the automatism of its industrial phase that it could generate a theory of itself possessing corresponding abstraction. Such a hypothesis need not, of course, negate the political and historical importance of Marx’s theory of class struggle. The automatism of capital would create a rebellious proletariat and a recalcitrant bourgeoisie at the same time that it subordinated the labor process to its structural imperatives. Nor does this hypothesis need to relativize the validity of Marx’s own discourse, which, as an abstraction, might be seen as intrinsically a prioristic and bound by ideology. As Sohn-Rethel has noted, *Capital* is not only a description of actual relations of production and circulation but also a critique of prevailing views of these relations; as such, it provides a critique of prevailing abstractions. Its partisan position in the class struggle need not therefore imply a diminished explanatory power. As Marx repeatedly argued, abstraction is a necessary consequence of the development of the forces and social relations of production, but it does not in itself necessarily imply alienation and fetishism. Indeed, abstraction of social relations is a precondition to the development of explanatory abstraction:

As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone. On the other side, this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference toward specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals

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can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference.<sup>68</sup>

It is only to the bourgeois economists, Marx noted, that “the *objectification* of the powers of social labour appears . . . as inseparable from the necessity of their *alienation vis-à-vis* living labour.” The very process of consolidating production and exchange into an increasingly complex social division of labor also created the class that, constituted by abstraction alone (at least from the point of view of capital), would abolish the conditions of alienation (and of its own existence as a class) altogether.

Marx’s theory of capital confronts and criticizes the nature of capitalist abstraction directly, in the realm of political economy. The representational strategy of the nineteenth-century documentary novel, I propose, more indirectly expresses the increasing complication and opacity characterizing the realm of production. Despite its circumstantial concreteness, the documentary novel at this time achieves a new level of abstraction. Again, to quote Marx: “The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception.” The apparent autonomy of the fictive realm, its liberation from the cumbersome apparatus of pseudofactuality, its implicit claim that the text’s reconstituted particulars replicate the concrete features of the referent—all these constitutive aspects of the generic contract of the historical novel mediate the “unity of the diverse” in nineteenth-century society. In one sense, then, the totalizing strategy of the historical novel—particularly in its classical phase—can be seen as an attempt to outline the vanishing lineaments of a world being rendered increasingly opaque by the hegemony of capital. The text’s immersion in the dynamics of historical process and its insistent depiction of the workings of a society in its entirety involve an implicit rejection of reification and fragmentation. The totalizing strategy of the historical novel thus signals the epistemological achievement of a transcendental sub-

<sup>68</sup>Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundation of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1973), 104. The passages quoted are from pp. 832 and 101.

jectivity which (like the transcendental subjectivity that “steps to the side” of the labor process) comprehends and describes the workings of the mechanism from which it is alienated. As Lukács noted in *The Theory of the Novel*, the nineteenth-century novel “is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”<sup>69</sup>

Even as the automatism of capital generates abstractions that possess increased explanatory power, it at the same time threatens to sever altogether the historical connection between subject and process, analogous configuration and referent. Alienation and commodity fetishism blur the configuration of the social formation and further distance the “second nature” of the exchange abstraction from the “first nature” of use values. Alienation—or, estrangement, as Marx termed it in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*—means the separation of wage laborers from the products of their labor, from their life activity as productive beings, from their fellow laborers, and from themselves.<sup>70</sup> In alienating laborers from the totality of the labor process, the abstraction of the wage relation thus creates material, social, and conceptual fragmentation. Commodity fetishism thus displaces alienation onto the products of labor. Marx concluded in *Capital*, “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.”<sup>71</sup> When alienation and commodity fetishism exert dominant influence upon the epistemological

<sup>69</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 56. The view of totality as a rejection of reification provides the epistemological basis for Lucian Goldmann’s theory of realism. “The [realistic] novel of the problematic hero” arose, Goldmann declares, “from precisely the traits analyzed by the theories of reification dealing with commercial and nineteenth-century liberal capitalism. The novel form was founded precisely on the opacity of social life, and the individual’s difficulty in orienting himself and giving his life meaning” (*Cultural Creation in Modern Society*, trans. Bart Grahil [Oxford: Blackwell, 1976], 43). Goldmann sees the realistic novel as intrinsically critical and adversarial; as is clear from the preceding discussion, I see the realistic novel as primarily incorporating dissent and reproducing dominant ideology.

<sup>70</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan, ed. Dirk J. Struijk (New York: International, 1969), 106–19.

<sup>71</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 1:72.

## Practice

matrix within which consciousness confronts material reality, phenomena that are the products of purposive human activity appear natural and ahistorical; stasis takes the place of process; the self becomes privatized, hypostasized as an essence apart from, and antagonistic to, its actual embeddedness in the social world.

At the same time that the automatism of capital enables the formulation of increasingly comprehensive explanatory models (fictive, historical, or economic) for social processes, it also fosters a disjunction between these conceptual abstractions and their referents in historical actuality. Just as the exchange relation fetishizes the products of human labor, rendering equivalent those expenditures of labor power that in fact create widely varying use values, the nineteenth-century documentary novel—particularly in its later phases—fetishizes the very procedure of analogous configuration, suggesting an uncritical and unmediated equivalence between the represented social world and the contradictory complex of social processes for which the text purports to offer an explanatory account. The implicitly adversarial epistemological stance of the pseudofactual novel—its querying of the relation between perception and cognition, its foregrounding of the problem of ideological perspective—has been superseded by a mimetic strategy that presents as inevitable the epistemological and political hegemony of the industrial capitalist class. Authenticating documentation functions primarily to promote the illusion that the generalizations projected in the mimetic text possess an unproblematic legitimacy; authority replaces testimony. The very capacity for synthesizing totalization that constitutes the strength of the nineteenth-century historical novel also signals its crucial fragility. As the automatism of capital presses to its limits the principle of equivalence in the monopolist era, it is inevitable that the representational procedures of classical liberalism will also be pressed to their limits, ultimately producing qualitatively new kinds of documentary mimesis. Empiricist documentation is no longer a means to cognition, but a barrier that must be overcome if the text is to assert its appropriation of reality.