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CREATING THE PAST ANEW:
THE VARIETIES OF AMERICAN HISTORICAL FICTION

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
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* * * * *

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CHAPTER I

THE VARIETIES OF AMERICAN HISTORICAL FICTION

Historical novels are seldom respectable among academics and other serious readers of contemporary fiction. While courses are now routinely taught in science fiction and detective stories--two other kinds of fiction once considered sub-literary--few universities offer classes in the historical novel from Scott to the present, and few scholars publish articles studying its textual or interpretive issues. Reviewers of serious fiction who do recommend such works may begin with a mea culpa. Roger Sale has written of two books "whose excellence has shamed me into realizing that there may be other good novels that I have never looked at because they are about historical figures." He continues, "It may well be that an almost sure formula for remaining unknown is to write a serious historical novel; who will believe it isn't Desirée or Dinner at Antoines?"¹

The nineteenth century was less prejudiced. Among European writers Dickens, Tolstoy, Stendhal, Flaubert, Gogol, Pushkin, and Manzoni wrote historical fiction, and
Goethe compared Sir Walter Scott favorably to Shakespeare. In the United States, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain wrote such works.

But until quite recently, the important American novelists of this century (with the great exception of Faulkner) rarely concerned themselves with the history of earlier generations. Scholarship on American historical fiction has been, on the whole, sketchy, ill-defined, or otherwise unsatisfactory. The seminal work on historical fiction generally is Georg Lukács's *The Historical Novel*, which was first published in 1937; although a translation into English came out in 1962, the work was not revised to include any works after the thirties. The only American author Lukács mentions is Cooper, and the book's Marxist tendentiousness limits its value as a study of the varieties of fiction. Until the mid-seventies, the only book-length study devoted entirely to the American historical novel was Ernest Leisy's book of that title, published in 1950. This work, too, is outdated, it makes only a perfunctory effort to define the genre, and it hardly distinguishes between major and minor authors. (Melville's *Israel Potter* gets only a paragraph, and Hawthorne does not appear at all. But Kenneth Roberts, Walter D. Edmonds, and James Boyd are discussed in detail.)
Since the 1960's, the situation has changed both in fiction and scholarship. In 1960 John Barth published The Sot-Weed Factor, set in eighteenth-century Maryland and written in a pastiche of eighteenth-century styles. William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner, based on accounts of an 1831 slave rebellion, was a controversial best seller in 1967. Norman Mailer divided his book The Armies of the Night (1968) into two sections: "History as a Novel" and "The Novel as History." The seventies saw the publication of E. L. Doctorow's Book of Daniel and Robert Coover's The Public Burning, both of which draw (directly or indirectly) on the Rosenberg case, and Doctorow also wrote Ragtime, in which Freud, Houdini, Emma Goldman, and J. P. Morgan are characters. As for scholarship, Harry Henderson's Versions of the Past: The Historical Imagination in American Fiction (1974) is an important book about the treatment of history by our great writers from Crèvecoeur and Cooper to Mailer. A number of articles about these works and authors appeared, and Joseph Turner's fine theoretical essay on the genre came out in 1979.

These new studies suggest that the American contribution to the genre has just begun to be evaluated. Versions of the Past offers a new way of looking at our classic authors, and Turner's article shows that previous attempts to define the historical novel have been misguided.
Before turning to them, however, I wish to examine what has traditionally been considered "historical" about such fiction, and how the genre originated.

The "past-ness" of historical fiction is presumably its distinctive characteristic, yet this quality has seldom been precisely defined. In fact, it is not very clear how far in the past a work may be set, let alone what its relationship to that past must be, for the book to be "historical." Sir Walter Scott felt that the historical work must be set at least fifty years before the author's own time, but he realized this figure was arbitrary. Harry Henderson has said only that it must be set "in the unexperienced past, in the world that existed before the author was born." But many best-selling "cape and sword" romances set in the distant past may strike us as fundamentally "unhistorical," perhaps because their settings often seem arbitrary--their plots formulaic, their creation of past societies confined to externals. The best historical fiction usually attempts to re-create the sensibility, or the unique historical character, of a period as well as its costume. The first writer to succeed at this was Scott, and to understand how the genre has changed, we must begin with his accomplishment.

According to most literary historians, Scott invented the genre with Waverley in 1814. He was not the first to
write fiction set in the remote past; The Castle of Otranto, to take one famous example, exploited the late-eighteenth-century taste for medieval romance. But Otranto and the seventeenth-century French "historical" fictions, as Georg Lukács has commented, lack "derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age."^4 The psychology and manners of characters in these works were like those of the writer's own day, as with the "costume dramas" now. Scott, as I shall demonstrate in a moment, gives a sense of his characters' rootedness in a particular time and place; their moral crises, and the ways they resolve them, reflect their historical circumstances. Moreover, Scott had a new subject matter. An Augustan by birth and training, he nevertheless saw the inadequacy of the Augustan view of society, and his works dramatize a different view. One critic has written that for Scott the old view was inadequate because society could change and each person must respond to this fact: "The best way to show this was to show a society in the process of becoming something different while confronting an alien tradition in military or political conflict."^5

Scott's innovation can itself be explained historically. Certainly historicism, the philosophy of history that developed out of the late Enlightenment, represented
a view of society different from that of the Augustans. German philosophers and historians, in particular--Herder, Justus Möser--emphasized organic processes of social growth; in its simplest form, historicism meant that man had no nature, only a history. Men were no longer regarded as everywhere the same, but formed by interplay with their environment, geographical and cultural. These new ideas were given impetus by the revolution in France. Lukács has written that the Revolution made history a mass experience for the first time. Between 1789 and 1814 Europe experienced a quick succession of upheavals which made their historical character far more visible than did previous events. The appearance of the new genre in the British Isles was no accident, since England, relatively stable at this time, allowed the channelling of a newly-awakened historical feeling into "a broad, objective, epic form." As for Scott himself,

his world-view ties him very closely to those sections of society which had been precipitated into ruin by the industrial revolution and the rapid growth of capitalism. Scott belongs neither with the ardent enthusiasts of this development, nor with its pathetic, passionate indicters. He attempts by fathoming historically the whole of English development to find a "middle way" for himself between the warring extremes.

That is, he consoles himself by finding that the most violent struggles in English history have eventually subsided into a compromise: the War of the Roses finally
gave way to the illustrious reign of the Tudors, the Cromwellian upheaval led ultimately to the "Glorious Revolution."

Interestingly, the central characters in a Scott novel are not the great "movers and shakers" of English history; rather, as Lukács has defined him, the hero is "always a more or less mediocre, average English gentleman." Such a character is useful in this kind of novel because he functions as a hub around which events revolve, so that we see him in contact with individuals from all ranks of society. Furthermore, he has the potential to join either of the warring factions, so that he dramatizes the conflict in society as a whole. As Lukács puts it, "Scott's greatness lies in his capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types"—Waverley, Ivanhoe, and Quentin Durward, for example. Great men, when they appear at all, appear with their personalities fully formed. We see them only when they are significant, fulfilling their historical missions (though we may see their petty qualities as well as the splendid ones). As is true of the ordinary folk, however, their relation to their era is complex; they are created by history just as much as they create it.
Waverley's title character and Fergus McIvor, a local leader of the Jacobites, exemplify Scott's method of characterization. He sets the book in the Jacobite rebellion of 1745; characteristically, Prince Charles plays only a minor role in the plot. Waverley, the "middling English gentleman," is the son of an opportunistic Hanoverian, but he also responds to a kind of sentimental Jacobitism, represented by his uncle. He allies himself with McIvor and the Stuarts out of idealism; the book is organized around his eventual disillusionment with the cause and the discovery of his identity as a Waverley. Francis R. Hart has said that Waverley and McIvor are both "studies in romantic quixoticism," but otherwise they are very different. McIvor can be seen as one kind of Romantic hero--"dangerous, dishonest . . . Machiavellian, heroic"--but his falling-out with Waverley over a point of honor represents not only a conflict of personality, but the instability of Jacobitism.8 Scott is careful to set this calculating, fierce chieftain in the exact historical context:

Had Fergus Mc-Ivor lived sixty years sooner than he did, he would, in all probability, have wanted the polished manner and knowledge of the world which he now possessed, and had he lived sixty years later, his ambition and love of rule would have lacked the fuel which his situation now afforded.9
This emphasis on the relation between individuals and their time is present even in the novels which do not deal with great battles or causes. In *The Heart of Midlothian*, for instance, the situation of the central characters (the Deans family and Effie Deans' lover, Staunton) is clearly connected with the legal-historical situation. Effie Deans has been convicted, on circumstantial evidence, of the murder of her illegitimate child. The theme of the book is the relationship of justice to mercy, and Effie's conviction, which is eventually overturned thanks to her sister's errand of mercy (Jeanie requests a pardon from the Queen), has come about largely because of the "legality" which typifies England's attitude toward Scotland, and vice versa. Not only has child-murder so increased in Scotland that the authorities resort to extreme law to deter it, but a pardon is unlikely because the English court has been recently angered by Scottish behavior in the Porteous riots, which form the backdrop to the novel. Porteous, a soldier responsible for security at public executions, had stood trial for shooting into a mob rioting at the execution of Wilson (a smuggler) and been pardoned, after his conviction, by the English government; a mob then took justice into its own hands by seizing Porteous from his cell and lynching him. The historical factors complicating the issue include the public's
admiration for smugglers, who defied England's restraints upon its trade, and England's need to show firmness in dealing with such outlaws. Scott also connects these conditions to his plot by making Effie's lover a partner of Wilson's and the leader of the lynch mob. Furthermore, the legalism of the English courts is mirrored by the legalism of the lynch mob, which scrupulously observes the letter of the original sentence in executing Porteous.

Scott's works often exhibit, then, what might be called either a sociological or an epic dimension, since they are nearly always concerned with the interaction of the individual destiny and the national one. His success at this, in the early novels especially, was the quality which so impressed Continental writers like Goethe and Balzac, and which commentators as diverse as Lukács and Cockshut identify as his major contribution to fiction. Cockshut has discussed Scott's habit of juxtaposing small events and large to provide a complete picture of a society. The large events are not used simply as ironic counterpoint to the small. The battle of Drumclog in Old Mortality, though militarily rather unimportant, dramatizes the complex of feelings involved in the rebellion, so that we experience both the tension of battle as it must have been felt by the participants and the subtle interplay of human motives which has led to the larger
The perspective Scott provides on this battle by drawing back from it to the whole nation parallels the scenes of private life which are interspersed in the *Iliad* (the games played by the warriors, for instance); we see both the detail and the historical "canvas" as a whole. The difference, in Scott, is the reduced scale of the soldiers' personalities and the almost historicist conception of the fateful coincidence of man and moment—we understand how a certain personality type meets a different fate in 1745 than it would in Scott's own day.

Scott's "epic" quality passes into American literature, as most literary historians have shown, with Cooper. Scott, as I have noted, is the pre-eminent novelist of social change; his portrayal of the Highland clans always has an elegiac note because of his knowledge that, despite their inspiring example of courage and loyalty, they are doomed by the changes in Scottish society. Leslie Fiedler remarks that Cooper learned from Scott "to invest his projections of the primitive with the pathos of the lost cause, and to play out his action on the 'ideal boundary' between two cultures, one 'civilized and cultivated,' the other 'wild and lawless.' "¹² In America, of course, the "ideal boundary" is the continually shifting frontier, and the "primitive" in the American landscape was the Indian.
These substitutions gave Cooper opportunities, in the Leatherstocking saga, for the first significant mythic approach to the American experience, as Richard Chase, as well as Fiedler, has shown. But Cooper arrived at this only gradually. In his first historical novel, *The Spy*, Fiedler argues, Cooper imitated Scott more directly: the book is based upon historical documents, it uses the American Revolution as a Scottian "ideal boundary" across which the protagonists move from safety to danger and from one way of life to another, and the Washington--Harvey Birch pair corresponds to the Richard Lion-Heart--Robin Hood pair in *Ivanhoe*. Eventually he moved farther and farther away from documented sources and historical people, and by the time of *The Last of the Mohicans* his work had become increasingly the manipulation of symbolic figures in a symbolic landscape: that is, Scott has been transformed by the American imagination, with its propensity for Gothic melodrama. Also, the specific event loses the value it had for Scott. Cooper is more interested in the historical situation, Harry Henderson has argued:

Cooper's effort was directed in each of his novels towards defining that situation through one dominant theme, and matching his simplicity of historical theme by a narrative line that, compared to Scott or even to the Scottish master's other American pupil, [William Gilmore] Simms, is simple and sparse, without the complexity, diffuseness, and richness of social
milieu that can be evoked by elaborate subplotting.\textsuperscript{15}

Many commentators have also focused on Natty Bumppo and his derivation from the Scottian hero. Lukács says that Cooper's greatest triumph is the development of the Leatherstocking character—a simple figure who experiences his tragedy without understanding it.\textsuperscript{16} Like Scott, Cooper is depicting social change, but he is writing about the rapid and brutal conquest of the wilderness brought about by colonizing capitalism. Bumppo represents the historical tragedy of the early colonizers who emigrated to preserve their freedom, but then destroyed this freedom by their own actions—he blazed trails for people who later condemned him because he had infringed their self-serving laws. Harry Henderson writes that Cooper departed most significantly from Scott's ideas by de-emphasizing both historical event and mediocre hero without abandoning them entirely. The Scott hero is replaced by the renegade or mock-renegade; even conventional heroes, on the rare occasions that they appear (John Paul Jones in \textit{The Pilot}), are presented as semi-renegades.\textsuperscript{17}

Whatever the differences in their views, the older historians and critics of American fiction generally deplored the influence of Cooper and Scott, and assumed that this tradition of historical fiction was the only one. Richard Chase defines two streams of American "romance-
novels," one represented by Hawthorne, Melville, James, Twain, and Faulkner, the other by the writers descended from Cooper, whom he says were "justly contemned by Mark Twain and James." He lists Surry of Eagle's Nest (John Esten Cooke, 1886), Ben Hur (1880), When Knighthood Was In Flower (Charles Major, 1898), Gone With the Wind (1936), and the works of Kenneth Roberts, and comments,

Although these works may have their points . . . they are, historically considered, the tag-end of a European tradition that begins in the Middle Ages and has come down into our own literature without responding to the forms of imagination which the actualities of American life have inspired.18

Likewise, Fiedler writes in his chapter on Cooper, "The historical romance is by definition not serious," and "The historical romance is the 'cleanest' of all sub-genres of the novel thus far, the creation of a self-conscious attempt to redeem fiction at once for respectability and masculinity."19 For both critics, then, little needs to be said for the genre after Cooper: it is cavalier in its treatment of serious issues, and undergoes no important development.

Though both these critics devote much space to Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner, they seem not to grasp that the authors of "legitimate" fiction often wrote works which can be considered "historical." Indeed, some of the greatest American books (The Scarlet Letter, Absalom,
Absalom!) are set in the past or examine the relation of the distant past to the present. More recent studies of these classic works indicate that we have defined "historical fiction" too narrowly and ignored the importance of history for our novelists.

Harry B. Henderson's *Versions of the Past* is such a groundbreaking study of our fiction. It discusses the works in light of two opposing views of history, which Henderson calls the "progressive" and the "holist." The "progressive" frame, which derives from Puritan thought, presumes a constant nature of man, and regards history as measurable change on an absolute scale (for instance, progress toward individual liberty). Progressive historians like George Bancroft assign a transcendent importance to ideas, and regard society as composed of two forces, from whose clash comes change. They believe that reason conforms to science, and they emphasize historical "laws."

In contrast, the "holists" (historians such as Francis Parkman and W. H. Prescott) emphasize the stasis or stagnation of societies rather than progress, and they describe how the parts of a given society interact, measuring change only in terms of the particular period under consideration. For the holist, values are not eternal, nor is humanity universal; both are formed by culture, and manners and mores are more important than ideas as such.
Rather than seeing society as composed of two forces in conflict, they see it as a seamless web of relationships. Holists believe man's reason is non-scientific, and they look for historical causes in the cultural matrix. Henderson summarizes the function of the progressive frame as a means of organizing the imaginative resources of a people to accept social change. It may celebrate the status quo by dramatizing its creation, but it also prepares us to see the status quo upset. The holist frame, on the other hand, may promote appreciation of social stability; it absolves the past from moral judgment while alienating one from considering the possibility of change in the present.

Henderson then applies these concepts to fiction, and sees a tension between the two frames in our novelists. For instance, Cooper and Hawthorne are the great holist writers of the nineteenth century. Hawthorne's prototypical situation is the struggle of an individual who insists upon a radically different interpretation of reality from that of the social structure, which retains the holist virtues of cohesion and continuity. His characters are the frustrated agents of the will toward progress. Melville is the first to transform the structural reference of the historical novel from holist to progressive, and Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* is the first important historical
fiction in our country written from the progressivist viewpoint. In our century, Faulkner investigates historical narrative itself by subjecting the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* to a searching critique, and he deals with renegadism and its relationship to racial "false consciousness" after the manner of Cooper and Melville.

Henderson is the first critic to try demonstrating in detail a continuity of historical consciousness in American fiction from Cooper to the present. Inevitably, his terms are somewhat Procrustean, and the reviewers of his book criticized what is, at times, too clear-cut a division between the two frames.²¹ (He does admit that most good novels include elements of both--Hawthorne depicts a holist society threatened by characters of progressive vision, and Sutpen is the "progressive" character, a self-made man, in the holist world of *Absalom.*)²²

One idea Henderson mentions early in the book connects his thesis with that of the other important theoretical essay of the seventies. He remarks that the creation of a fictional world in the past poses many of the same problems as does the literary creation of utopias, for in both cases the illusion of a "whole" society must be sustained, in the past, the future, or outside time. Hence, he says,
the historical past may figure in the novel as an escape to a Golden Age, or a point in time from which some vision of the "future" (time-present for the author) is projected. In terms of literary modes, these might be the settings for, respectively, romance, "epic," and satire.

The difference is that the historical novel forces the author to deal with the question of social change. This is one of the few places where Henderson considers strictly generic issues; the passage shows he is aware of the variety of roles history can play in a fictional work. This variety is the focus of Joseph W. Turner's essay "The Kinds of Historical Fiction." According to Turner, "neither history nor fiction is itself a stable, universally agreed upon, concept"; furthermore, formal properties are not the genre's distinguishing characteristic, despite the efforts of critics to establish them. Instead, content is what we recognize as the difference from other kinds of fiction. He claims that a novel must meet only one of several conditions to be called "historical"--for example, actual people as characters. William Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner is an example of what he calls "documented" fictions (that is, they recreate a documented past). The other principal types disguise a documented past or invent a past. R. P. Warren's All the King's Men exemplifies the "disguised" type, since the account of Willie Stark's career so closely
parallels the life of Huey Long that "we find ourselves reading the novel as a disguised account" of Long. Although Warren has chosen to transform the historical Long, the similarities between the fiction and recorded history continually tease the reader.

Even farther along the continuum that stretches from history to "mainstream" fiction is the "invented" historical novel. Here the principal characters and events are all invented, and since most novels present themselves as if they were history, Turner relies upon a temporal requirement, as do Lukács and Henderson: they are often distinct from other fiction only in "placing the action far enough into the past as to claim for themselves the status of a historical reconstruction." Sometimes, as in Absalom, Absalom! (his example of an "invented" fiction), a further difference is that, in realistic novels, though the narrator may pose as a historian, attention is usually diverted from the problem of how the narrator can know the story; in invented historical novels, by contrast, that very possibility is often brought into question, turning the novel into a reflection on the way we know history.

Turner points out that one novel may combine elements of all three varieties (though unfortunately he cites no example). But whereas invented and disguised historical fictions are seldom confused with actual history, documented
historical fictions create generic problems because they share events and characters with historical narratives. He feels that fidelity to recorded history in a fiction is a vexing problem: traditionally, theorists have argued either that the artist must respect recorded fact or (the Aristotelian position) that fictions are autonomous, and hence the responsibility of the artist is not to history but to his fiction. While the latter position neatly obliterates the distinction between documented and other kinds of historical fiction, it does not, Turner claims, dispose of the "ontological status" of the historical material. That is, if Faulkner tells us Rosa Coldfield did or did not have children, that is the end of the question. But a novelist who builds a novel around Queen Elizabeth's legitimate son is likely to meet an unwillingness to suspend belief from the reader. Turner emphasizes that this fidelity to fact is only a conventional expectation, but the convention results from a generic choice, and he feels critics should establish the conventions of historical fiction rather than argue about their historical accuracy as such.25

Invented historical fictions, Turner feels, differ little from non-historical ones: "they rely on novelistic forms that can be loosely termed realistic--avoiding, that is, anything that might draw attention to the fact that
they are not history but fiction." These novels avoid "self-conscious reflections on their ontological status," and the narrator pretends the events refer to an extra-textual reality. The reader thus brings only quite generalized historical expectations to these works, so this kind of work retains the usual autonomy of fiction. Disguised historical fictions, too, prefer "realistic" forms, but they expect the reader to grant the novelist's right to disguise history and then transform it. In All the King's Men or other traditional examples of this type, "the reader interprets the referential component of the novel retrospectively"—that is, he has a dual perspective, constantly measuring the fictional events against the historical ones, a process which reinforces the separation of the two. In more recent novels, however, the disguise is continually called to the reader's attention, insisted upon as it is not in Warren's novel. An illustration of this trend is E. L. Doctorow's The Book of Daniel, which is and is not about the Rosenberg case. The narrator, Daniel, continually manipulates the reader in order to push the book toward documented historical fiction; many of his remarks presume that the reader will penetrate the disguise, while other passages require an acceptance of the disguise. (I shall talk about this book more extensively in Chapter V.) Finally, documented historical fictions
also have generic conventions designed to protect their autonomy. The author does not have to point out what he has invented, and often he centers the narrative, as Scott does, on the invented characters.

Turner mentions, but does not elaborate on, the trend in recent years toward self-reflexive documented historical fictions, such as *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Little Big Man*, which play with the generic conventions and emphasize, rather than conceal, the artifice of their inventions.

Turner's examples are all from twentieth-century fiction; he admits that some difficulties arise in dealing with earlier examples of the genre. One can safely assert that Melville is the author of both invented ("Billy Budd") and documented ("Benito Cereno," *Israel Potter*) historical fictions. But these works reveal the limitations of Turner's definitions, too. He claims that invented historical fictions are "loosely...realistic" in technique, whereas Melville's (and Hawthorne's) books are quite remote from "realism" as it is ordinarily defined. Indeed, many of the books I will discuss in depth fall rather into the "romance-novel" category set forth by Richard Chase.26

Another drawback is that the distinction between invented and documented fictions often collapses, as far as the reader's expectations are concerned. Three of Janet Lewis's books are based on real legal cases, so
technically they are "documented" in Turner's sense, but only one (The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron) includes a famous historical person--Louis XIV--as a character. Turner needs to specify that the people and events be famous, since the difference between invented and documented fictions is mainly that from his knowledge of history, the reader has preconceptions about the characters and the plot. Lewis does tell the reader in her prefaces about the outcome of the trials, so to this extent she follows the "spirit" of documented fictions. But it is easy enough to imagine completely documented books for which the reader's expectations are the same as for any other work of fiction.

Despite these reservations, I agree with Turner that one must speak of historical fictions, and in this study I shall explore the varieties of fiction through representative works from this century and the previous one. I do not aim at comprehensiveness: the essay will not trace the development of American historical themes, since that has been done quite satisfactorily by Henderson. He is interested in the two kinds of historical consciousness which unify the fiction, while I am interested primarily in exploring the multiplicity of artistic effects which can be achieved.
Most of the works I have selected are documented, in Turner's sense; even so, the variety of their techniques and effects is bewildering. Some, like Nat Turner and Kenneth Roberts's Oliver Wiswell, concern famous people and great events; others, including Janet Lewis's books, do not. Some presume that the truth about history can be known, but Absalom, Absalom! casts doubt upon that idea.

It is not enough, then, to say that historical fiction descends directly from Scott. His works never have a major historical figure at the center, they are carefully documented (often with learned footnotes), and they often deal with the fate of whole societies. Scott assumed that the truth about the past may be known and successfully re-created in art. He was the self-conscious creator of a new fictional genre, distinct from history. Today E. L. Doctorow claims in an essay that "there is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative."^7

I shall not restrict my discussion to works which draw only upon American history. (Janet Lewis's books, which have a thematic continuity despite their differences in setting, need to be considered as a unit.) But I have set some limits, so that this study does not become a tour of the miscellaneous. I shall discuss primarily books which are "historical" by Henderson's rule of thumb:
they take place in periods before the author's birth. This distinction excludes so-called "non-fiction novels" (e.g., *In Cold Blood*) and works which reflect on recent history through a fictionalized or semi-fictionalized narrator (*Invisible Man*, *The Armies of the Night*, *U.S.A.*). (The exception is Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, which I include because of its semi-"disguised" genre, its depiction of historical change, and its relation to Doctorow's other historical work, *Ragtime*.) The books I have chosen can be compared in subject, theme, or technique. Chapter II deals with Janet Lewis, who, like Scott, is interested in depicting the sensibility of a remote era. The third chapter discusses Melville; the fourth considers two twentieth-century books that take very different approaches to subjects treated by Melville, the American Revolution and slave rebellion. My last chapter begins with Faulkner, whose fictional meditations upon history have a good deal in common with Melville's; his *Absalom, Absalom!* is also, however, important in the development of contemporary "experimental" historical fiction. The chapter then moves to Doctorow's two books, which exemplify this experimental fiction by playing with the reader's expectations and stretching the definition of "historical fiction."
Janet Lewis, the subject of the following chapter, might be called Scott's heir in her presentation of morally divided individuals in times of transition. But her works focus on individual psychology more consistently than Scott's do (The Heart of Midlothian is un-typical Scott in this respect). She also shares some traits with earlier American masters: her depiction of moral struggle, for example, is sometimes reminiscent of Hawthorne's. However, her work defines the modern craft of historical fiction at its most accomplished; it proves that one need not sacrifice psychological complexity in re-creating another milieu. She illuminates the differences between another time and ours; by dramatizing the destinies of her characters so well, she shows that the differences are no barrier to our involvement.
CHAPTER I NOTES


3Dwight Macdonald has suggested that popular fiction of this sort caters to "our mania for information. We are fascinated by the lingo, the folkways, the techniques peculiar to a profession or a social group, and we want to get the inside dope on the way of life of a telephone linesman, a Renaissance nobleman, a professional game hunter in Africa." "The Triumph of the Fact," in Against the American Grain (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 408. I will discuss one such historical bestseller, Kenneth Roberts's Oliver Wiswell, in Chapter IV.

4Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p. 19. The other early Englishman whose books could be called "historical fiction" is Defoe, whose Moll Flanders and Journal of the Plague Year are meticulous re-creations of London in the previous century. These early examples of the "false document," as we shall see in Chapter V, represent an alternative to Scott's kind of fiction, and have influenced so recent a work as Doctorow's Ragtime.


The rest of this paragraph, and the next paragraph, are indebted to Lukács, pp. 23, 32-35.


This paragraph is drawn from Hart, pp. 141-42.

For the detailed explanation of this point, see Cockshut, pp. 65-72.


Henderson, p. 53.

See Lukács, p. 65.

Henderson, p. 53. In Chapter III I will show how Melville developed John Paul Jones as "renegade hero" in Israel Potter.

Chase, p. 20.

Fiedler, pp. 165, 170.


In his review of Henderson’s book, David Levin writes, "The holist and progressive frames cause trouble from their first application, to the works of the romantic historians. The frames simply will not fit. Mr. Henderson does perceive a genuine temperamental distinction between Bancroft/Morley and Prescott/Parkman, but only by extremely selective quotation can he make his progressive and holist structures separate those four historians into two pairs ...In similarly awkward ways the two structures become encumbrances in the otherwise intelligent chapters on Cooper, Melville, and Twain." But Levin concludes that the
book "repeatedly teaches us important truths about major American writers and about the historical imagination in their fiction." American Literature, 77 (1975), 293-94.

Other reviews include Louis Rubin, "Looking Backward," New Republic, 19 October 1974, pp. 20-22; Peter Shaw, "Politics and Historical Criticism," American Scholar, 44 (1975), 496-98; and Larzer Ziff, "Masters of the Finite," TLS, 7 March 1975, p. 242. All express a similar ambivalence about Henderson's key terms, while admitting the value of his readings. See also Chapter III, Note 1, on Henderson's discussion of Melville.

22Henderson, pp. 105, 257.
23Ibid., p. 13.

25His contention that the status of "fact" in fiction is closely tied to genre is borne out by works which propose "alternative history," as in his Queen Elizabeth example. Works like Ward Moore's Bring the Jubilee, which starts from the premise that the South won the Civil War, are usually classified as "fantasy" or "speculative fiction." See the discussion of Michael Moorcock's Warlord of the Air, a work of "alternative history," in Eric S. Rabkin, The Fantastic in Literature (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 21-4.

26Chase distinguishes "romances" as follows: "Character...becomes, then, somewhat abstract and ideal, so much so in some romances that it seems to be merely a function of plot. The plot we may expect to be highly colored. Astonishing events may occur, and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic, plausibility. Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms." The American Novel and Its Tradition, p. 13.

Both Henderson and Turner are vague in their temporal requirements. Henderson discusses novels like Invisible Man; as he says, his book aims primarily to cover all important American works that reflect on history. Turner insists on the requirement for "invented" fictions, but says nothing about his other two varieties. It is true that "invented" fictions should be separated from others, but some way of distinguishing "documented" fictions from "non-fiction novels" would also be useful.
CHAPTER II
JANET LEWIS'S "FABLES OF AUTHORITY"

Janet Lewis is the author of four historical fictions: The Invasion, The Wife of Martin Guerre, The Trial of Soren Qvist, and The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron. She has also published a novel set in modern America (Against a Darkening Sky), several volumes of poetry, a collection of short stories, and two children's books; she adapted Martin Guerre for an opera by William Bergsma. However, only the historical fictions have been consistently singled out by critics. Roger Sale, Donald Davie, and Fred Inglis have written about one or more of these books; Evan Connell, in an essay about Martin Guerre, called it "one of the most significant short novels in English." A few years ago, the Southern Review published an interview with her and an appreciative feminist reading of her works by Ellen Killoh. None of Lewis's books, though, has been a commercial success, and twenty years after her last historical fiction, she is hardly a familiar name.

Her books differ from most other contemporary historical works in several respects. Although she has written
"documented" fictions in Joseph Turner's sense, few of her characters are famous (Louis XIV, in Monsieur Scarron, is the only one familiar to most readers), and they are seldom directly involved in great events like wars, revolutions, and diplomacy. Though three of the novels have a thematic continuity—the quest for justice—all are set in different places and different centuries. The Invasion takes place during the opening of the Northwest Territory in the eighteenth century. The scene of Martin Guerre is sixteenth-century France; that of Soren Qvist, Denmark during the Thirty Years' War. Monsieur Scarron opens in the France of the 1690's. These widely varying settings put her works apart from those of Melville, who also explores an issue through several works: his concern is primarily American self-consciousness, and three of his fictions are set between the Revolution and the turn of the nineteenth century.

The thematic continuity of Lewis's last three works originates partly in her source: all are derived from accounts in Famous Cases of Circumstantial Evidence, an anonymous compilation with an essay on the theory of presumptive proof by the British legal scholar Samuel March Phillips. In each book a legal accusation is central. A wife accuses her husband, returned after eight years, of being an impostor; a pastor is tried for the murder of a
servant; a French bookbinder is charged with circulating a libel against the king. However, the strictly legal aspects of the trials are subsidiary. All are concerned mainly with psychological and moral issues, and they imply an instability in the political order which corresponds to the moral convulsions of the central characters.

In Martin Guerre, the trial occurs during a conflict between the king of France and the Duc de Guise; the Denmark at the beginning of Soren Qvist is recovering from the raids by Wallenstein's men; Paris, the scene of Mon-sieur Scarron, suffers from unrest and famine because of Louis's wars. The trials, to some extent, thus mirror a widespread social upheaval.

In contrast, The Invasion is almost an idyl. Its origins, in fact, are quite different from those of Lewis's other books. She was acquainted, as a child, with two members of the Johnston family, whose grandfather, John Johnston, is a central figure:

During summer vacations, I grew up hearing them [Molly and Howard Johnston] tell stories around campfires about their grandmother, Neengay, who was the Indian woman in the story, and their grandfather. . . . When I began doing short stories, I thought, "I'll do a sketch of Miss Molly." I found out pretty soon that I had to do not only Miss Molly, but her ancestors. After that, I was up to my neck.2

Lewis also insists that it is a "narrative" instead of a "novel" or "romance." But it deals with that theme which
so haunts American writers, the relationship of red man and white, and, like her other books, *The Invasion* uses its central characters to suggest the potentialities and difficulties within an entire culture.

After a brief prologue noting the British victory over the French at the Plains of Abraham in 1759, the book begins by describing the Ojibway family of the warrior Waub-o-jeeg; one chapter later, it introduces the Irishman John Johnston, who has come to the Northwest Territory as a fur trader. The lives of Indian and white man gradually become intertwined: Johnston marries Neen-gay, Waub-o-jeeg's daughter, and the work becomes a chronicle of the Johnston family down to the death of a descendant in 1928. This marriage represents a reconciliation between the old and new communities. As Ellen Killoh has written,

> This order flourishes for a few years under Mr. Johnston . . . but is soon swamped by the invasion of white settlers with allegiances to other orders more narrowly political and economic. Prior to this invasion, European feudalism could co-exist in harmony with native Indian culture because both were based on allegiance to the family or clan or tribe.3

Hence Johnston's death, which occurs about halfway through the book, is felt throughout St. Mary's; the Irishman has been evenhanded in his dealings with the two cultures, and has retained his equanimity despite political events which
injure his trade and frustrate his claims to property from the British government.

It is in Johnston's journal, too, that we first come across something that will lead to the dispossession of the Indian land by the United States government: the region's rich mineral deposits. Throughout the middle of the book, a mysterious boulder emerges as the object of superstition among the Indians and of scientific curiosity for white men; it proves to be copper. Similarly, we are informed of each new treaty between the U.S. and the Indian nations; this fits neatly into the story of the Johnston family, since Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who has married one of John Johnston's daughters, helps negotiate the agreements, first as Indian agent for the Sault area, then as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the new state of Michigan. So Lewis in this case, too, balances her account of a single family with the development--progress on one side, deterioration on the other--of the entire territory.

The treatment of Schoolcraft is balanced between sympathy and judgment. Rather prim and bookish, he nonetheless demonstrates courage in his expeditions into the wilderness and a genuine, if misguided, interest in the lore and political situation of the Indians. He fails to make an orderly system of Ojibway grammar, but publishes a collection
of Indian folklore: "He had spent fourteen years in collecting these stories, and had lavished care upon the rewriting of them, struggling to make his language pure and graceful without losing any of the aboriginal simplicity." But he compares favorably to Longfellow, who uses Schoolcraft's book as a source for Hiawatha: the poet "found in it 'a mass of ill-digested material'; he endeavored to simplify, to rearrange, to suppress the 'gross,' the disagreeable, the too fantastic." In a rare moment of overt irony, Lewis notes the favor with which Hiawatha is greeted by Schoolcraft himself and Emerson: "The nation in general, now that the West was safe for civilization, the Indian question having been solved by treaty, deportation, and other methods kinder not to mention, was delighted to contemplate the Indian as 'a human being capable of the tenderest emotions.' "4 Here is a suggestion of the mythic quality in the Indian which is created by white artists: the red man becomes important in literature as he disappears from the continent.

As an agent of the government, Schoolcraft, though well-meaning, contributes to the decline of the Indian community through the treaties he presides over, and his narrative of an expedition into Ojibway territory unwittingly gives information which will lead to the commercial exploitation of the area. Neengay, Johnston's wife, has
realized even earlier in the narrative that the treaty of 1820 is the beginning of the end for the Ojibway nation. As the book progresses, chapters are dominated more and more by descriptions of industrial and commercial activity, culminating in a set-piece about a freighter passing through the newly constructed locks into Lake Superior. And though the early chapters have dealt at length with Indian characters, the book closes with a funeral at which only two mourners have Indian blood. The communities are separate once more, the dissolution of the Johnston family reflecting that of the society. This elegiac note is comparable to that in the works of Scott and Cooper. In these authors, a pre-eminent theme is the encroachment of a commercial, technologically advanced civilization upon a less "advanced" one, and the subsequent destruction of the latter. Lewis, in contrast to these writers, downplays military conquest in favor of the cultural and economic kinds, but she too gives a very vivid sense of what has been lost in the victory over the smaller community. Whether that community is that of Scottish Highlanders (Scott) or Indians (Cooper and Lewis), it is shown as harmonious, in touch with nature; it is characterized by a kind of fierce but eloquent language.

Like Lewis's subsequent works, The Invasion demonstrates precision of detail and sensitivity to prose rhythm.
He walked in woods that were bare and pure as if the snow and ice had minutely scoured each twig and tree trunk. The leaves of last autumn lay underfoot, beaten together and bleached to the color of the rush mats made by the Woman of the Glade. It was a tissue like wasp nest, breaking crisply. The sunlight was brilliant upon it, and above it the poplar trunks assumed a pale velvety green like the wings of the luna moth, the willow withes a new red bark, which from a distance was a haze like wine. The snow had not disappeared, it had merely given way on the higher ground and the less shaded places. It lay in drifts two and three feet deep under the cedars, and a foot away from it, in the hot sunlight, began the uncurling of the silky yarrow, the furred heads of brake.

An unusually well-written example of the frontier novel, The Invasion impresses one with its depiction of both societies. But little in it suggests the terrifying moral conflicts which will dominate Lewis's later books.

The Wife of Martin Guerre, published nearly a decade after The Invasion, opens with a paragraph which demonstrates Lewis's mastery of exposition:

One morning in January, 1539, a wedding was celebrated in the village of Artigues. That night the two children who had been espoused to one another lay in bed in the house of the groom's father. They were Bertrande de Rols, aged 11 years, and Martin Guerre, who was no older, both offspring of rich peasant families as ancient, as feudal, and as proud as any great seignorial houses of Gascony. The room was cold. Outside the snow lay thinly over the stony ground, or, gathered into long shallow drifts at the corners of houses, left the earth bare. But higher, it extended upward in great sheets and dunes, mantling the ridges and choking the wooded valleys, toward the peak of La Bacanère and the long ridge of Le Burat, and to the south,
beyond the long valley of Luchon, the granite Maladetta stood sheathed in ice and snow. The passes to Spain were buried under whiteness. The Pyrenees had become for the winter season an impassable wall. Those Spaniards who were in French territory after the first heavy snow-fall in September, remained there, and those Frenchmen, smugglers or soldiers or simple travelers who found themselves on the wrong side of the Port de Venasque were doomed to remain there until spring. Sheep in fold, cattle in the grange, faggots heaped high against the wall of the farm, the mountain villages were closed in enforced idleness and isolation. It was a season of leisure in which weddings might well be celebrated.

With her customary precision, Lewis shows us not only the time and place, but the cultural-political context. Since the couple are children of two wealthy families, we recognize a society in which the marriage ceremony symbolizes and legitimizes family ambitions, ambitions that override individual choices. (The next paragraph discloses that Bertrande had not seen her husband until this day.) The peasant families are compared to the great seignorial families of France--this reminds us of a political hierarchy and emphasizes the dynastic quality of the marriage. The description of the icy landscape which occupies the rest of the paragraph also extends outward, this time spatially, from the two children in bed to the limits of the kingdom: "The Pyrenees had become for the winter season an impassable wall." This landscape is bleak--the snow is "choking" the valleys, the Maladetta
is "sheathed in ice and snow," the passes to Spain are "buried under whiteness." The countryside enforces isolation upon those unlucky enough to be caught within its borders, and this bleakness, this isolation, are, as we shall see, characteristic of the moral landscape as well. But the final sentence returns us, almost gently, to the sleeping couple: "It was a season of leisure in which weddings might well be celebrated." "Leisure" and "celebrated" mitigate the harshness of the season; even out of such forbidding circumstances, is the implication, may come great joy.

The plot is uncomplicated. Bertrande, at first put off by her moody and taciturn husband, begins to love him; she is pregnant with their first child when Martin informs her, one day in the fields, that he will have to disappear temporarily from the farm. Against the wishes of his father, the patriarch of the estate, Martin has taken grain from storage to plant in a disused corner of the property, rather than let the land go to waste. The father is a stern authoritarian (earlier we have seen him strike his son for his negligence), and Martin plans to be away from the farm until the old man's anger subsides. And he departs immediately, with Bertrande's reluctant acquiescence.
But he does not return within a few weeks, as he had promised; soon months and finally, years have gone by, and with the death of the father, the last barrier to his return is removed. At last, when their child Sanxi is eight, Martin returns to Artigues, and explains that he had wandered throughout Europe, taking part in battles for the king of Spain; passing through Rieux he learned of his father's death. He is greeted warmly as head of the household, and only Bertrande cannot surrender herself to the occasion. Once he has settled at the estate, her suspicions grow that he is not her husband, but an impostor—despite the willingness of the family to accept him as master. He resembles the Martin of old, talks like him, recalls events from the marriage; yet he is a gentler, more considerate man than he who went away. When he becomes aware of her fears, he tries to reassure her that his experiences have changed him. But her suspicions increase, exacerbated by their accidental encounter with an old soldier who calls him an impostor, claiming to have known the real Martin Guerre on the battlefield. Unable to live with her fears, Bertrande denounces her husband to the authorities, and a trial to establish his identity begins.

At the trial in Rieux, some witnesses identify the defendant as a Gascon named Arnaud de Tilh, and they
claim he admitted to playing the role of Martin Guerre in order to come into the estate. Others, including members of the Guerre family, swear that he is the real Martin. The court finds the defendant guilty, and sentences him to death, but the prisoner's response is curious: "In spite of the sentence just passed upon him, his eyes were clear, and his face bright, one would have said, with joy" (MG, p. 82).

The decision is appealed to the Parliament of Toulouse, by Martin's sisters, who honestly believe the man is their brother. The new trial is even more agonizing than the previous one, for the case is becoming celebrated. This time an old man testifies that the prisoner is Arnaud, his nephew. And suddenly into the court strides a wooden-legged soldier, a double of the prisoner; he claims to be the real Martin. Forced to choose between them, the relatives of both men indicate that the stranger must be the true Martin. Bertrande begs forgiveness of her husband, who responds coldly. Arnaud says to her, "'Can you not marvel now that the rogue, Arnaud de Tilh, for your beauty and grace, became for three long years an honest man?"' (MG, p. 107) He is convicted of a host of offenses, and is executed in 1560 at Toulouse.

This implausible story is, according to Lewis's preface, well documented; it is discussed in Les Recherches
de la France by the French jurist Etienne Pasquier, who claims to have based his account upon one provided by Jean Corras, the recorder for the original trial. Such documentation, of course, does not excuse implausibility in a fictional treatment of the case, and one can point easily to difficulties with the narrative. Of his impersonation, Arnaud says that "he had been tempted to the imposture by the frequency with which he had been mistaken for Martin Guerre. All that he knew of Martin's life and habits he had gleaned from Martin's friends, from his servants and from members of the family" (MG, p. 108). But we may disbelieve so accomplished a fraud, especially since we see no evidence that Arnaud and Martin ever met, or that any third person could have provided such detailed information to an impostor. A testament to the work's power, however, is that it survives this difficulty, primarily because our attention has been drawn from the simple question of the husband's guilt or innocence, and fixed instead upon the psychological and moral complexities displayed by Arnaud and Bertrande.

An aesthetic question more serious than the success of the fraud may be asked: is Arnaud's persistence in his imposture credible? To present the reader with his thoughts, even as late as his arrest, would of course
destroy suspense, but Lewis's preface has already alerted us to his guilt. It may be that the work develops at cross purposes—one purpose demands gripping the reader at the expense of character development, the other sacrifices suspense to our deeper understanding of human nature. If Lewis denies us entrance into Arnaud's thoughts, does she suggest indirectly his growth in dignity, and make that change convincing?

The one important scene in which we see Arnaud directly, without his actions being filtered through Bertrande's consciousness, takes place just before his arrest: he has gone to see the parish priest for advice about how to respond to her accusations. The scene changes character when we read the work a second time, for it now appears a curious mixture of overt humbug and apparent sincerity. Arnaud even at this point still lies about his identity ("'There would have been no sorrow, Father, if I had not tried to run away from my father's anger'"), but when he explains his reasons for not leaving Bertrande, we can see him avoid the issue of her adultery, rather than lie outright: "'as if I were to fasten upon her the guilt of a sin--' he hesitated--'a sin of which she must not be accused' " (MG, p. 70). Is this a genuine effort to protect Bertrande, or simply part of a ruse? Arnaud is a consummate actor, and the priest
already believes in his innocence. (It is a further
irony that the priest, like the members of the Guerre
family, values the new Martin more than the old.) Is
Arnaud clever enough to realize that he can extract from
the priest exactly the advice he wants, so as to cloak
his escape as a pilgrimage, and thus delay pursuit? He
asks that the priest say nothing to anyone about the
matter. Again, is this concern or guile? The scene
multiplies our problems in establishing the change in
Arnaud; he may not have left the farm earlier in the
hope that he would find some way of dealing with Ber-
trande—a risk worth taking for the possession of the
estate, especially because the rest of the family de-
fends him.

It is not until the end of chapter two (about three-
quarters of the way through the book) that Lewis provides,
in the pronouncement of the death sentences at Rieux,
the glimpse of Arnaud which suggests a mystery about his
character, a response that cannot be explained simply by
his enacting a role. But from this point on, he is
mainly a passive figure in the proceedings. Bertrande
is aware of his gaze in the courtroom at Toulouse:
"He was regarding her with a look at once patient, tender
and ironic" (MG, p. 96). His assurance and dignity are
noted more than once; he speaks again, however, only at
the end, in the passage I have cited. What has brought about this transformation? If we are not to be left with the sentimental conclusion that a rogue is easily redeemed by the love of a good woman, we may look for an explanation in words that Lewis uses to describe Bertrande: "Her happiness ... shone the more brightly, was the more greatly to be treasured because of the shadow of sin and danger which accompanied it" (MG, p. 55). Perhaps it is something in her psychological state to which Arnaud responds, and the savor of it may be intensified by his sense of her moral struggle which, even in its potential destructiveness towards him, grants him awareness of a kind of importance in another's life--an identity--that he has never before known; to that extent he accepts her judgment upon him, as well as that of the law. But his process of understanding is concealed from us, and any such conclusion can only be tentative.

What is clear about Arnaud is that he represents a personality type which conflicts with the world he has entered. His uncle says of him,

I have loved this boy ... for he has a way with him, a way of stealing the heart, but I have feared for him ever since he grew old enough to talk. He has had no respect for the laws, gentlemen. It breaks my heart to say that he has even declared there is no God. He has revered his parents not at all. With no faith, no respect for family, nor for the law
of the kingdom, what could one hope for, gentlemen? He has a good heart, that is all. But what is a good heart when he can so disgrace an honorable family? (MG, p. 100).

A more striking contrast to the stern, absolute, hierarchical morality of the Guerres can hardly be imagined. (Even "a good heart" separates him from the real Martin, whose response to his wife's agony is anger and shame.) Donald Davie has commented that Arnaud is a modern man, an individualist whose world is not governed by the moral order which characterized Bertrande's world:

Since human relations are no longer for this modern man controlled by the traditional hierarchies, he has learned to be infinitely more skillful, perceptive, and resourceful in such relations. . . . "Ironic" is one of the attitudes Arnaud de Tilh is capable of, which marks him off from both the Martin Guerres and from Bertrande.7

Bertrande internalizes this conflict between tradition and innovation, and she is the only character whose thoughts Lewis reveals to us. (In the longer works, we observe the feelings of half a dozen or more characters.) What seems to terrify Bertrande most is not that the false Martin may harm her or the family--indeed, the irony of her situation is that he treats her better than did the Martin who vanished--but that she may unwittingly have become a sinner in the eyes of God. She cannot be
convinced by the expedient argument that she should subdue her suspicions for the good of the family. We have been prepared for this decision early in the book by seeing her admiration for Martin's father, that symbol of inflexible justice:

He sat at ease in the stiff-backed rush-bottomed chair, his dark jerkin laced to the throat, his right hand resting on the edge of the table, vigilantly surveying his household, like some Homeric king, some ruler of an island commonwealth who could both plow and fight, and the hand which rested on the table was scarred as from some defensive struggle in years long gone by. Without bearing any outward symbol of his power, he was in his own person both authority and security. He ruled, as the contemporary records say, using the verb which belongs to royalty, and the young girl seated beside him, in feeling this, felt also the great peace which his authority created for his household. . . .Because of him the farm was safe, and therefore Artigues, and therefore Languedoc, and therefore France, and therefore the whole world was safe and as it should be. (MG, pp. 22-3)

She believes completely, as Arnaud does not, in the correspondence God-king-father, and accepts the authority of each as absolute. (Also, among her thoughts before the second trial is that she has become the defender of the authority represented by the head of the household, "a tradition more potent than the church" [MG, p. 91].) The ethical issue, then, is clear to Bertrande: for her,
"any love, no matter how kind, that relies on deceit
insults her because it fails to accord her any moral
status." But she tries to temper justice with mercy,
as Martin and his father will not. She alone in the
Guerre household cannot accept the brutality of the elder
Guerre toward Martin, and she does not demand death for
Arnaud. As Killoh has observed,

At the trial she demands of her false hus­
band only an admission of guilt, penance,
and a fine to the king and herself—a
restoration of natural order rather than
vengeance on his person. The court, however,
reads the law to its letter; it demands
his death. This . . . violates Bertrande's
sense of justice, as the elder Guerre,
Martin and Arnaud had earlier.

When the verdict is announced, she faints.

It is true that Lewis also portrays very vividly
Bertrande's bitterness at being abandoned by her husband
when her sexuality has been fully awakened:

He had deserted her in the full beauty
of her youth, in the height of her great
passion, he had shamed her and wounded
her, and when he returned, if he should
return after the death of his father, his
authority would be as great as his father's
then was, and to murmur against his treat­
ment of her would then be improper in the
highest degree.

(MG, p. 34)
We see that subsequent betrayal by a man is likely to bring forth a retributive passion that will spare nothing in its way. However, Lewis provides this information not to belittle or explain away Bertrande's decision, but to enrich our perception of it; we see the interaction of a single personality with the cultural epoch that nurtured it. She is not condescended to, but shown sympathetically, even approvingly, as befits the complexity of her loyalties and her moral courage. For Lewis, the act of defining one's self involves, pre-eminently, such moral choice, even if, as in Arnaud's case, the choice is to submit oneself with dignity to the condemnation of a system of justice alien to one's nature. For Bertrande, the choice requires that she sacrifice the love of both men and the security of her family. At the end, she leaves the courtroom, "knowing that the return of Martin Guerre would in no measure compensate for the death of Arnaud, but knowing herself at last free, in her bitter, solitary justice, of both passions and both men" (MG, p. 108).

This book, especially, connects Lewis with Scott, as a comparison of Martin Guerre to The Heart of Midlothian shows. Both authors are interested in their central female characters as representative of a particular time and place; moreover, the novels are set at times of cultural transition. (In the case of Midlothian, the
transition, as Avrom Fleishman argues, is "from the predominantly Calvinist ethos of Scottish tradition to the enlightened relativism of Scott's time." Both books focus on the woman's agonizing decision where legal punishment is involved. But in Scott's work, the trial comes early, and the psychological interest is in Jeanie Deans's moral evolution from that scene to the end of the book. As Fleishman summarizes it, "The paragon of truth, law, and justice has become a fallible and typical citizen, affirming an all-too-human sense of the laws which hold society together and yet must be evaded at times for the sake of persons." In other words, Jeanie's austere moral code, however admirable in its purity, is shown as softening as a result of her experiences, and we accept her decision to free the Whistler, Staunton's natural son and murderer, rather than obey the civil law. In Martin Guerre the trial is the culmination of Bertrande's moral struggle, and we are meant to see her decision as correct. If Jeanie's triumph is to transcend the law, Bertrande's is to affirm it.

Martin Guerre has political overtones as well. Etienne Pasquier, whom Lewis quotes in her preface, is clearly representative of the traditional point of view when he declares, "For their children, fathers and mothers are the true images of God upon earth"; yet he
continues, "But I would willingly ask you if this Monsieur Martin Guerre who became so embittered toward his wife, did not deserve a punishment as severe as that of Arnaud Tillier, for having been by his absence the cause of this wrongdoing?" In this light, Guerre is reminiscent of Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*--one of several parallels between Lewis's works and Hawthorne's, as I shall argue later. Pasquier's remark has interesting cultural implications. As Donald Davie says, the question means, "Does the authority inhere in the office? Or does it in some degree rest upon desert in the office-holder?" The news from the world outside Artigues and Toulouse suggests a corresponding conflict in the political realm. Toward the end of the book the characters hear of a massacre of French Protestants at Amboise. This massacre, historically, was a result of a jockeying for power among the great nobles in the reign of the young Henry II, who, against the advice of his father, had restored to favor both the Constable de Montmorenci and the Duc de Guise, men powerful enough to endanger the monarch's authority. The insurrection at Amboise was fomented by the Bourbons and Montmorencis, betrayed to the Guises (then in power); the Guises moved the young king from Blois to Amboise, trapped the rebels, and punished them fiercely. The point of Lewis's reference
is that the so-called wars of religion, as Davie points out, were actually "wars of dynastic emulation, the consequences of monarchical authority being weakened." Lewis has drawn a parallel here, as in The Invasion, between the crumbling of authority in a small community and in the whole political unit (here, France); this larger turmoil, we find at the end of the book, has involved the real Martin, who had served in Flanders as a soldier. Lewis writes with the perspective of the twentieth century on this war between potential usurpers and traditional figures of authority; she and her readers know that less than seventy-five years away is Oliver Cromwell's establishment of a republic in England. Bertrande's world is slowly giving way to one in which powerful groups will regard the authority of king, father, and husband as no longer inviolable but dependent upon the good conduct of the officeholder. So in this sense, too, Arnaud is prophetic. The Guerre farm prospers under his management, which has substituted a spirit of cooperation for that of coercion.

The issue of new versus traditional authority is, of course, constant in society; Lewis attempts to show us how individual destinies may be bound up with it, as well as how previous societies have defined it. In this book she seems very close to religious orthodoxy,
and certainly Martin Guerre lends itself to a conservative argument that the task of self-definition is best done within traditional institutions. But her next book, The Trial of Soren Qvist, concerns the failure of legal process and Qvist's creation of meaning without it.

Like Martin Guerre, Soren Qvist tells us quite early about the outcome of the trial. This time, though, we have not just a clue in a preface, but an elaborate prologue, which reveals that Qvist was executed for killing his servant Niels Bruus. The rest of the work re-creates the circumstances which allowed him to be wrongly convicted. Here again Lewis foregoes suspense to concentrate our attention upon the ordeal of Qvist and his family (we know the thoughts of his daughter, especially); she thus gives the narrative a sense of doom comparable to that of classical tragedy.

The dramatic irony contributes to the pain we feel in watching Pastor Qvist's struggle with his conscience about Niels Bruus, for we are continually reminded that the virtue of this extraordinarily good and courageous man is being manipulated into weakness. The pastor's deadliest enemy is Bruus's brother Morten, a malignant landowner who has asked to marry Qvist's daughter. The pastor's response is to throw the man out of his house. Niels, with his brother's encouragement, seeks a job on
the pastor's farm, and Qvist, in whom the sense of
calling dominates his better judgment, accepts him, as
penitence. Niels proves to be slothful and stupid, and
Qvist, whose fierce temper is his serious failing, must
continually resist the impulse to strike the man. Once
Niels realizes the moral stranglehold in which he has
the minister, he becomes insolent, and the occasion is
ripe for Morten Bruus to stage a fraudulent murder scene.
Clothing a suicide's body with his brother's clothes, and
bribing Niels to leave the country, Bruus manages to hide
the corpse on Qvist's property and to produce witnesses
of a quarrel between the minister and Niels which ended
in violence; though the witnesses cannot testify to
Niels's murder, Bruus is able to convince them that the
buried corpse is his brother's, and the trial of Qvist
ensues.

Significantly, the religious climate of this book is
Protestant, not Catholic as in the two books set in
France. Davie has pointed out,

In a Protestant polity the image of natural
authority is no longer the father as hus­
bandman, but the farmer as father as
priest. . . . The authority of Parson
Qvist is undermined, and at last destroyed,
because the authority of the priest, which
might have seemed to buttress Qvist's
authority as head of his household, in
fact works against that authority and saps
it. . . . His office as priest betrays
him into dangers which his office as farming patriarch would have saved him from.\textsuperscript{15}

Also, his Protestant sensibility which sees the tangible world as "but the sign manual of its creator" results in the pastor's assent in his own destruction: the circumstantial evidence which Bruus has fabricated convinces him that he has done the deed unconsciously, and that the evidence is God's chastisement. Qvist is in fact relieved to "discover" that he has committed the crime during one of the trances which occasionally afflict him, for the possibility most terrifying to him has been that God has dealt with him unjustly. As he explains to his daughter when, at the end of the narrative, she has come with a plan for his escape, "'Rather than acknowledge my sin, I blamed God for His unkindness to me, and for His unjustness. Did I not know all the time that He who is All Goodness could never be unjust? . . . Truly, I believe I am happy.' \textsuperscript{16}

Our reactions to Qvist's serenity may be ambivalent; I shall return to this in my comments about Lewis's work as a whole. The members of Qvist's family show a variety of responses to his confession. Tryg Thorwaldsen, the pastor's prospective son-in-law and the judge in the case, is grateful to be relieved of responsibility for
passing sentence upon Qvist, though he immediately feels guilty about his reaction. Qvist's son Peder, unwilling to believe the charges, plans his father's escape. The daughter, Anna, says to her father, "'But it is not just . . . that a man should suffer punishment for a deed unconsciously committed'" (SQ, p. 223). Only Qvist himself, and Morten Bruus, who dies rich and hated long after the pastor's execution, can accept the outcome.

The connection of the principal characters with king and country is more marked here than in Martin Guerre. On the second page is a description of Jutland in 1646, when Niels returns to it:

Now that the king was old, and Denmark shrunken and impoverished by his reign, some of the Golden Lions had indeed shown themselves most noble. Others were quarrelling among themselves. But here even in Jutland, which had suffered most from the king's wars, the reign of Christian the Fourth was still considered glorious. Even the wayfarer looking upon the Golden Lion, when he thought of the king, thought of him as splendid. Failing in health, blind in one eye ever since the great naval battle of the Kolberger Heide, and now turned sixty-nine, Christian was, in this year of 1646, even more the hero of his people than in his lusty and extravagant youth.

(SQ, p. 12)
Qvist comments twice upon the king's activities, once to praise Christian's practice of baptizing infants without exorcism, once to criticize the war, which the king has pursued despite the advice of his council and which must be supported by heavy taxation of the peasants. Qvist feels compassion for the peasants--this leads to one of his confrontations with Morten Bruus, who has grown wealthy by swindling them--and it is interesting that he is unimpressed by the argument that the war is a holy one, against the Papists: "'I wonder sometimes if it is not mainly a war to keep the Swedes from feeling themselves too big,' said the pastor" (SQ, p. 105). In passages like these, Qvist is a prescient figure. He is shrewd enough to see the imminent war in political as well as theological terms, and he foresees the devastation it will bring upon Denmark. (The book's prologue details the horrors which Wallenstein's men have wrought upon the countryside.) The parallels with Christian IV establish Qvist as an authority-figure whose role corresponds to the king's; in fact, the pastor is more conscientious in the protection of his "flock" than is Christian. The bitter irony is that Qvist, the morally superior individual, is doomed, whereas the monarch not only survives his foolishness but is revered in his old age. But
this is not Lewis's egalitarian criticism of kingship as such; instead it is a reminder of the fate of those who persist in living by God's law instead of man's—a harsh fate, but freely and significantly chosen.

Qvist's disenchantment with the war is matched by his skepticism about witches and devils; his views on evil spirits are contrasted throughout with the superstition of the housekeeper Vibeke, whose fears Qvist regards with tolerant amusement. He is a type of the Rational Man, and his rationality helps make him a target for Morten Bruus; however attractive he may be to us, we sense that his willingness to trust in the comprehensibility of the world is enough to separate his world from ours.

The Trial of Soren Qvist is generally agreed to be one of Lewis's two best books. Evan Connell rates it just below Martin Guerre, and Fred Inglis has argued that Qvist, not the earlier work, is her masterpiece. Certainly it is almost the equal of Martin Guerre in portraying the agonizing process by which a sympathetic character is destroyed, and perhaps it is superior in formal terms—the plot by which Qvist is ensnared is somewhat more plausible than Arnaud's imposture, and Lewis seems to have a clearer sense of the effects she wishes to produce. (Lewis herself, according to the
interview published in 1974, feels that Soren Qvist is the better book.) Donald Davie has criticized the work for the occasional awkwardness of her efforts to re-create seventeenth-century speech: "One character calls another 'a clever varmint' and explodes on the next page into, 'Damn it all,' but also into, 'Oh, the devil take it'; whereas another character exclaims, 'he will not, the poltroon.'" On this point he is just, but he is on shakier ground when he criticizes the shifting of viewpoint within the book: "the story of Soren Qvist is not told from the standpoint of Anna Sorensdaughter at all so consistently as the story of Martin Guerre is told from the standpoint of Bertrande de Rols." But the shift away from Qvist's consciousness is never confusing, and the depiction of his daughter's incomprehension is as indicative of Qvist's spiritual isolation as would be the exclusion of other minds altogether. Furthermore, since Qvist represents the religious authority upon which the community is based, it is appropriate for Lewis to show the reactions of others to his dilemma. In any case, Soren Qvist is a remarkable performance, the scenes of Qvist's internal struggle being perhaps the most memorable aspect of a book as gripping as Martin Guerre and even fuller in its
evocation of a vanished age—unlike Guerre, it is a
full-length novel.

Lewis's final essay in this genre, The Ghost of
Monsieur Scarron, is the longest and most detailed of the
four. Of its origins Lewis writes as follows:

I researched it more than any of the
others. The trail was very faint and
hard to follow. . . . But there was a
Jean Larcher, and he was hanged for
having in his possession that libelle;
and I saw in the records of the Bastille
(in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal) the
entry which said we must interrogate
the wife of Larcher. I handled this
novel more freely as fiction than the
others because it was so difficult to
pin down the facts. The characters are
mixed in origin. . . . The characters
whom I did not attempt to invent [include]
the Abbe Têtu and M. de la Reynie.
Paul Damas I named and invented, but
there was an assistant.°

The parallel between monarch and subject occupies
a great deal more space here than in any of her previous
books. Louis XIV appears in several chapters; he and
Jean Larcher are the same age, and like the bookbinder,
he takes his obligations as patriarch very seriously.
As is also the case with Larcher, his authority is
threatened from within his "family": the novel is set,
significantly, in 1694-7, when the depletion of resources
caused by Louis' wars made anti-monarchical pamphlets
common and food riots imminent in Paris. In the earliest
chapter about Louis we are told about the members of the royal entourage who bear him malice; their ill-will is revealed to us at the scene where Louis discovers the libelous pamphlet, "The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron."

This pamphlet is the link between Louis and Larcher, for its insult to the king's consort, Madame de Maintenon, so enrages Louis that he orders its anonymous distributor discovered and executed. This ripple of displeasure from the king eventually grows to engulf Larcher, for the bookbinder is framed by his assistant, Paul Damas, and hanged for complicity in circulating the libel. As Davie has suggested, the very production of pamphlets against the king implies, in this society, symbolic parricide, and among the book's most subtle ironies is that on the periphery of a "heretical" religious group is Nicolas, Larcher's son, who has set in motion his father's destruction by rebelliously quitting the family business and encouraging his parents to hire Damas in his place. At the end, Nicolas' actions turn from symbolic to literal parent-murder: he kills his mother and Damas (now his stepfather) upon discovering that they betrayed his father in order to remain together.

The characterization of Damas is the best example of the novelistic fullness of Monsieur Scarron as
compared to the previous books. Unlike Arnaud and Morten Bruus, this schemer is repeatedly presented from the inside, as is his victim. Damas is a dangerous mixture of cunning, sensuality, self-deception, and vanity; we are told at his first appearance that he has fled an earlier apprenticeship after his master's wife, whom he had seduced, informed her husband of the affair. Damas' reflections are typical of his guilty evasiveness:

Upon consideration he was convinced that she had planned it all from the beginning. It was a great wound to his vanity. On the other hand, it freed him, largely, from the guilt of having betrayed a man who had been, in the long run, kind to him, and this seemed to him, in his reaction against the woman's action, the more serious defection. She had seduced him. The conclusion permitted him to enjoy the sunny days, as he journeyed by water coach to Paris. . . .

We know that this wound to his self-esteem is connected to his wish to seduce Marianne Larcher, for even more powerful than his sexual desire is his need to dominate her. The plan to rob Larcher is designed, essentially, to test his power over Marianne; the decision to frame his master is more or less an afterthought. For Larcher himself, Damas has no strong dislike, merely some resentment that the bookbinder is master of his own shop and Marianne's husband. But even Damas' belief in Larcher's forbearance becomes, by a neat process of rationalization,
reason to resent him: "Jean was responsible for the present state of affairs as much as either of the lovers." Here, in contrast to Martin Guerre, the usurper of the woman's affections is not presented sympathetically. Damas' shabby amorality, affected by no more than a twinge of remorse, is a cogent demonstration that for us to understand all is not to pardon all.

Larcher is presented quite favorably. Despite his tight-fistedness and his lack of imagination, he is appealing; his piety and courage are amply demonstrated. He is drawn as a typical Parisian bourgeois, thinking of his obligations to relatives in terms of commercial transactions. But of the major Parisian characters, he is the only one to show dignity at the prospect of death. We learn of this only indirectly after he is arrested. This important difference in narrative technique from Martin Guerre and Soren Qvist may be due partly to his being a less interesting moral phenomenon than Arnaud, who is ennobled by suffering, or Qvist, who struggles to reconcile his suffering with his belief in divine justice. Larcher is simply an honest, stubborn tradesman whose ordeals reveal nothing further about his personality. But it is interesting that for the first time Lewis shifts the focus from the representative of the old order to the young subverters of that order (Nicolas,
Damas). (Of course, this requires qualification. Nicolas is very interested in Pascal and the religious issues of the day; Paul's rebellion is instinctive and personal, not ideological.)

While it may not be accurate to say that the world of Scarron is much bleaker than that of the preceding works (war and other cruelties are prominent in all three), neither Guerre nor Qvist so emphasizes age and decay. Paul is contemptuous of Larcher, the old man with a young wife; Marianne finds Paul's advances flattering because she fears she is growing old. Larcher is accused by his son of morbidity ("He's always talking of disaster, of illness, of his old age"). Louis XIV is old and ill, weary of his responsibility, and even minor characters like Racine and l'abbé Têtu are preoccupied with their age and infirmity. Even the youngest major characters are dead by the novel's close. The signs of moral renewal are confined to the activities of a few Huguenot characters, Jean Dumesnil and the Caillouës, mother and daughter, whose dignity and idealism throughout their confinement for heresy contrast with the moral ugliness of Damas and Madame Larcher. (The Caillouë daughter, as if in moral contrast to Madame Larcher, is also named Marianne.) But such moral example is now dwarfed by political events: wars, riots, prosecutions. The scope of
Monsieur Scarron is broader than that of Qvist and Guerre—a nation rather than a province—and although Lewis is returning to the scale of The Invasion, her portrait is of a country in decline, not expansion. The end of Monsieur Scarron comes sixty years or so before the events which open The Invasion—the defeat of the French in Canada.

Critical opinion has been divided about Monsieur Scarron. Fred Inglis considers it a disappointment, a failure in terms of formal coherence, and Evan Connell rates it below Lewis's two other books. Davie regards it as a "consummate performance," citing especially the "solidity" of its Parisian milieu as appropriate to a man like Larcher, so concerned with property, the tangible rather than the spiritual. Since the point of view shifts more often, and away finally from the character unjustly accused, Monsieur Scarron lacks the almost claustrophobic intensity of the previous works, and perhaps Paul Damas and Marianne Larcher, who occupy center stage as the book progresses, are less typical of their time and place than are Soren Qvist and Bertrande de Rols—the fear of aging and the will to power are hardly peculiar to Louis XIV's France. Nonetheless, the work compensates by its greater expansiveness in depicting an entire society, with subtle indications of connection and correspondence among its classes. The story generated
by the Damas-Marianne-Larcher triangle, intertwined as it is with changes in the political authority as the society becomes mercantile rather than agrarian, is not simply a story of passion which happens to be set in the late seventeenth century, but a fiction genuinely rooted in history; in its sure treatment of so many diverse characters, it demonstrates Lewis's power to integrate personalities and events into a single unified action--a "novel" as opposed to the "narrative" with which she began her career.

As I suggested in my discussion of Martin Guerre, Lewis shares some techniques and preoccupations with Hawthorne. Like The Scarlet Letter, Lewis's fictions include prefaces in which the author discusses her role as historian--presents the documentary evidence and tells us about the limitations she will put upon her invention. In Martin Guerre especially, Lewis has chosen to present Bertrande's sufferings of conscience and doubt within "romance" as defined by Hawthorne in his preface to The House of the Seven Gables. That is, she has allowed herself "a certain latitude" with regard to "the probable and ordinary course of man's experience." Lewis has denied the connection to Hawthorne: "He has always put me off to some extent because . . . he is an allegorist, and his characters therefore lose some
of their mixed humanity."^7 Certainly the authors differ in their attitudes toward novelistic detail. For Hawthorne's purposes it is largely irrelevant, while the illusion of solidity, of life as it is lived, is very important to Lewis's works. He is interested in Puritan New England as the setting for his moral investigations; Lewis is also interested in conveying the sensory qualities of each period. Her characters eat, make love, perform various domestic tasks, and gossip with neighbors in full view of the reader. They are also more dynamic than Hawthorne's. Whereas The Scarlet Letter presents Hester and Dimmesdale's sin as remembered, Lewis's works present the sinful acts themselves as well as their continual impact upon the day-to-day existence of the characters. This impulse toward roundedness, completeness, typifies her art.

Nevertheless, Lewis's interests, however far-ranging, are primarily moral, like Hawthorne's, and she also tends to present characters as quintessences: the tradesman, the country pastor, the peasant wife. Such characterization is inseparable from her larger aims, for it is important that we see these people as part of their times, suitable representatives of moral stances or historical forces which define their worlds as distinct from ours. Bertrande is interesting to us because the nature of her
moral struggles is timeless, but the precise configuration of her attitudes about hierarchy, obedience, and sin marks her as a woman of a certain time and place. The moral universe these characters inhabit is relatively lucid. Lewis clearly feels that her characters can be measured against an ethical norm, and that some (notably Soren Qvist) are worthy of emulation. This does not mean she holds simple and retrograde views about "moral standards" and their "decline" in the modern era, nor are her judgments simply those of a twentieth-century writer projecting her own values onto a different culture. More than almost any other historical novelist one can name, she respects the famous saying of Leopold von Ranke, "Every epoch is immediate to God, and its value in no way depends on what it has produced, but in its existence, in its very self."²⁸ She enters imaginatively the sensibility of the period, and attempts judgment on that basis, while providing the understanding of hindsight--to her virtues as novelist, which I have tried to illustrate throughout this essay, she adds those of the modern historian. Like good history, her works remind us of what we have lost as well as how we have advanced. As Ellen Killoh has remarked, her books are "suffused with a longing for the social and moral coherence of a society patterned on the extended agrarian patriarchal family."²⁹
She is especially drawn to a character like Bertrande who exhibits what Max Weber, in his sociology of religion, called the "ethic of intention." According to this ethical position,

the moral law itself is clear; man does not have to engage in a lifelong struggle to determine his ethical code. He is to be judged by the intensity and sincerity of his intentions. Thus his primary responsibility is for the purity of his ethical intention and not for the consequences of his action.30

Moral commandments, that is, are absolute; this is at the opposite extreme from "situation" ethics. Bertrande, of course, is not unconcerned with means and ends; she is tempted to abandon her suit rather than bring humiliation to the Guerre family, and the temptation is stronger because the estate has prospered under the false Martin. The old servant is implicitly presenting the argument from ethics of situation when she says, "'Madame, I would have you still deceived. We were all happy then!'" (MG, p. 69). But Bertrande's decision is firmly grounded in her beliefs about adultery, which cannot be mitigated by her unwitting complicity in Arnaud's designs. One of the most impressive things about Martin Guerre is that Lewis is capable of a convincing and sympathetic portrait of someone willing to sacrifice on principle the affection
of her husband, the harmony of her family, and the life of an accused man who has behaved more decently than her real husband. At the same time, as Killoh has said, "Only the Victorian and modern view that romantic love orders the priorities in a woman's life would find this an unusual, perhaps a shocking, thing for a woman to do." Bertrande's stance has moral beauty, and Lewis achieves this effect by showing that Bertrande's decision reveals neither self-righteousness nor self-delusion, but a consciousness which must subdue its deepest affections. It is difficult today to present such a nature without making its devotion to principle seem inhuman. Even Captain Vere, whose decision to execute Billy Budd is made in the name of higher law, is often stigmatized as the villain of the piece, although as I shall show in the next chapter, his judgment is made against his sympathies and, further, is influenced by the military situation. Bertrande has no such utilitarian compulsion, indeed resists it.

Asked in her 1974 interview about Bertrande, Lewis replied,

The contemporary reactions are very amusing. Most of them are impatient with her. They say, "Why didn't she take what she had?" and so forth. Most Catholic readers agree that this was the way she should have acted. They understand that. Although,
in the beginning, she was overwhelmed and very happy. . . . as soon as suspicion comes in the thing is poisoned, and she would want to get out of it.

Precisely the point of Lewis's works is to educate the historical and moral imagination whose impoverishment is so well exemplified by the "contemporary reactions."

Of the other central characters in her work, only Soren Qvist presents such a problem for a modern audience. The nobility and forbearance of John Johnston, the stubborn rectitude of Jean Larcher, are not necessarily more comprehensible than Qvist's faith, but they are not qualified by dramatic irony: we know that the pastor goes to his death deluded. A further irony, as we see in the prologue, is that although he is remembered by the villagers after his death, their proverb emphasizes his kindness rather than his example of faith, or of steadfastness in adversity. Lewis writes of him in the preface, "He is one of a great company of mer and women who have preferred to lose their lives rather than accept a universe without plan or without meaning" (SQ, p. 8). Asked by an interviewer, "Do you still believe this?" Lewis replied, "I think that's true. All the great religionists feel that it's more important to have a universe that makes sense than to continue to exist in a chaotic world. Wouldn't you agree?" To the interviewer's
response, "Even if, in fact, the universe doesn't make sense?" she said, "They would rather be burned at the stake." In the same interview she expressed her dislike of Sartre; however, without any explanation, she added, "I like Camus." Qvist appeared in 1947, The Myth of Sisyphus and The Stranger in 1942, and the former might be called a negative print of the latter pair. Camus is thoroughgoing in his rejection of Christianity, and the supreme value for him is man's consciousness of the incongruity of the attempts to impose order upon an absurd world. But Lewis appears to regard Qvist's attempt to "save God" as triumphant, his act of faith negating the success of Morten Bruus's plot. The attempt to deny chaos is itself seen as an affirmative act--she is far from an effort that accepts chaos as a fact and tries to construct a new ethic upon it. We may be more doubtful than she about Qvist's triumph.

Whatever our feelings about Lewis's stance on all these issues, we can see a vision of human life in her works that is beyond the capabilities of most historical novelists. These are not costume dramas, but works in which the particular and the general, the individual and the type, historical fact and novelistic invention, are held carefully in balance. The fate of Qvist, that superbly dramatic character, is directly related to his situation as farmer-pastor; Arnaud de Tilh is sent to his
death by a woman whose sternness, the product of her upbringing, is made deadly in combination with her sensuality and resentment; Jean Larcher is destroyed, ultimately, by the monarchical authority he has upheld. Even the weaknesses of each book are compensated by precision and vividness of detail, and by a prose lucid and beautifully controlled. Lewis's works, in other words, are proof that the genre may attract serious writers of talent, and that the books can be discussed in the same terms as other modern fiction—as works of art in which plot, character, and style are successfully integrated in the traditional way, yet quite original in conception. They offer one promising method of transforming fact into fiction; the subsequent chapters will concern other approaches.

First I wish to examine Melville, whose historical views have received less attention than those of Cooper or Hawthorne. These views are evident in his fiction as early as Mardi, and they anticipate much of what has happened in the historical fiction of our century. So to the author of "Benito Cereno," Israel Potter, and "Billy Budd" we may look for one alternative to the tradition established by Scott.
CHAPTER II NOTES

A list of these secondary sources, some of which will be cited in this essay, is as follows. Roger Sale mentions Lewis in a footnote in "Unknown Novels," American Scholar, 43 (1973-4), 103. Davie has written two essays about Lewis: "The Legacy of Fenimore Cooper," Essays in Criticism, 9 (1959), 222-38; and "The Historical Narratives of Janet Lewis," Southern Review, NS 2 (1966), 40-60. Fred Inglis's piece is "The Novels of Janet Lewis," Critique, 7, No. 2 (1964-5), 47-64. Evan Connell's essay about Martin Guerre appears in Rediscoveries, ed. David Madden (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971), pp. 30-7; this quotation is on p. 31. The issue of Southern Review with the two pieces about Lewis is NS 10 (Spring 1974); the interview with Lewis appears on pp. 329-41, and the article by Ellen Killoh on pp. 342-64. However, I have cited the interview throughout my essay in its book publication: in Fiction!: Interviews with Northern California Novelists, by Dan Tooker and Roger Hofheins (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/William Kaufman Inc., 1976), pp. 149-68.

Subsequent references to these articles will appear below as notes with page references and author's surname only. The interview will be referred to as "Tooker & Hofheins." The title of my chapter is adapted from the term "fables about authority," in Davie, "Historical Narratives," pp. 42-3.

Tooker & Hofheins, p. 151.

Killoh, p. 353.

Janet Lewis, The Invasion: A Narrative of Events Concerning the Johnston Family of St. Mary's (1932; rpt. University of Denver Press, n.d.). The first quotation in this paragraph is from p. 273; the second is on p. 324, the last on p. 325.

Ibid., pp. 55-6.

8 Killoh, pp. 349-50.
9 Ibid., p. 349.
11 Ibid.
13 Ibid., pp. 44-5.
14 Killoh, p. 347, suggests the way in which Martin is "absorbed" into the larger political issues.
17 Davie, "Narratives." Both quotations are from p. 53.
18 Janet Lewis, letter to David Robinson, July 28, 1978. Quotations are used with the permission of Janet Lewis.
21 Ibid., p. 230.
22 Ibid., p. 19.
23 Inglis, p. 62.
25 As Davie remarks in "Narratives," p. 58, "Each day afresh the king shoulders his burden, and yet in vain. For the outcome is made very clear. Commerce is of its nature international, crossing and recrossing those national frontiers which it is of the nature of kingship
to regard as inviolate. The very concept of the realm is out of date in a world of commerce. This is as true of commerce in ideas as in other commodities; and by focusing upon the booktrade in particular Janet Lewis is able to deal at one and the same time with commerce in ideas and commerce in tangible objects."


27 Lewis, letter to Robinson.


29 Killoh, p. 343.


31 Killoh, p. 350.

32 Tooker and Hofheins, p. 156.

33 Ibid., p. 163.
CHAPTER III
MELVILLE AND AMERICAN HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

We do not ordinarily think of Melville as a historical novelist, or even as a man deeply engaged in the political issues of his time. He seems instead a writer with twentieth-century philosophical concerns, trapped in the wrong era. Yet he was very much involved in that "quest for nationality" which preoccupied so many literary figures of his time, and at least three of his works, *Israel Potter*, "Benito Cereno," and "Billy Budd," can be considered historical fiction. These works, in fact, examine the "Adamic" view of American history which had arisen after the Revolution; they contrast the widespread view of America as the cultural and political vanguard of Western civilization with Melville's own brand of pessimism.¹

The "Adamic" (or "providential") view of America was expressed in its most extreme form by the historian George Bancroft, who called his ten-volume *History of the United States* (published between 1834 and 1876) "an epic of liberty." The Revolution, according to Bancroft, had introduced the fourth and final stage of history. The
first stage had ended with the age of Socrates, while the second had lasted from Athens to the advent of Christianity.

The third extends from the promulgation of the glad tidings of the Gospel by the Saviour to the American Revolution, which events may be deemed the two most important in the history of mankind. With the latter commences a new and more glorious era, of which the one immediately preceding it may be considered as little more than formative.  

While few thinkers in mid-century shared such unfettered optimism, the view of the new country as the great democratic experiment, the beginning of a new chapter in human history in which the nations of Europe were to read their own destiny, fascinated intellectuals abroad as in the United States. Condorcet, then the most important radical thinker in France, believed that the American Revolution demonstrated to the world the practicality of values long recognized but never followed: the belief in "the social contract" and in the power of reason and deliberation, and the faith in the capacity of men to build a new and harmonious state. Crevecoeur, that famous immigrant, enumerated in his Letters from an American Farmer the principles which set this country apart from the Old World: "a uniform and modest competition," religious tolerance, representative government, a fluid social structure hospitable to intermarriage, and a grass-roots
belief in progress. Even a skeptical observer like Tocqueville believed that American government pointed in the direction that Europe would soon follow, and visited this country to record his impressions (not all favorable) for his countrymen's benefit.

The idealization of America was extended into the past as well as the future. The signing of the Declaration of Independence was regarded as the most significant event since the Creation, and the apotheosis of national heroes was well underway by the turn of the nineteenth century. The deification of George Washington, in particular, was accomplished so rapidly--Washington died in 1799, and Parson Weems' celebrated biography appeared the following year--that the father of our country might well have echoed, on his deathbed, the words of the Emperor Vespasian: "I feel myself turning into a god." In a curious parallel to the beginning of the Christian era, the founding of the republic became the event by which all previous history was to be re-evaluated. If the sinful (i.e., European) past could not be sloughed off entirely, it could be interpreted as the pagan age from which the new civilization had triumphantly emerged; America chose to preserve only those values--a cultural heritage, for instance--that it could mold to its own purposes.
To be sure, this Adamic idea was not accepted un-
critically by the citizens of the new nation or by in-
terested foreign observers, and admittedly I have exagger-
ated the vehemence with which even the boldest nativists
protested their virtue. But the smugness of many citizens
was nonetheless sufficient to provoke a reaction from
conservative thinkers, here and abroad. On the political
level, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* repeatedly
warned Europeans of the defects in American society which
were permitted in the name of equality. In theology, the
"infinitude of the private man" celebrated by Emerson was
countered by the orthodox Calvinist religions, which
insisted upon sinfulness rather than innocence as man's
inevitable lot. At any rate, the battle lines were
drawn, culturally as well as politically and theologically,
by Melville's time.

A diversity of opinions was possible even among those
who believed in a specifically American literature. In
mid-century, such critics as Charles Sumner, T. S. Grimké,
and William Cooper Scott could argue that American liter-
ature must pursue its distinctive mission by rejecting the
"pagan primitiveness of the classics" and by "committing
itself to Christian humanitarianism," and essayists
could call for a new metrics to replace standard English
prosody, the abandonment from poetry of such English
birds as the nightingale and skylark, or the necessity of incorporating American political ideals into romance. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Sydney Smith could scoff, "The Americans are a brave, industrious, and acute people; but they have, hitherto, given no indications of genius, and made no approaches to the heroic, either in their morality or character. . . . In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?" Here, conservative writers like Lewis Gaylord Clark, editor of the Knickerbocker, championed Dickens for his "universalinity," which made nativist subjects and opinions look provincial, while Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes ridiculed the exaggerated claims of the nativist Cornelius Mathews by offering his "scientific" opinion that in twenty years men would be sixteen feet high "and intellectual in proportion."

Melville was present when Holmes made this remark, and his response was his famous essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses." "Mosses" was not, however, his first artistic expression of interest in America's historical role. As early as Mardi (1849), he had written in clumsy allegorical fashion about two philosophical travellers who visit many imaginary countries, including "Vivenza," a very thinly disguised version of the United States. Here they listen to demagogic rant by "Alarino of Hio-Hio" (a
satiric thrust at the jingoist Senator Allen of Ohio) and encounter "an undistinguished personage" (President Polk) as well as "Saturnina" (Daniel Webster). Chapter 161 concerns a scroll of anonymous authorship, fixed to a palm tree, which incenses the Vivenzan natives. On this scroll is a warning.

"And the grand error of your nation, sovereign kings, seems this: the conceit that Mardi [Melville's metaphor for the world] is now in the last scene of the last act of her drama and that all preceding events were ordained to bring about the catastrophe you believe to be at hand--a universal and permanent republic."

A little later the document reads:

"There are many who erstwhile believed that the age of pikes and javelins was passed, that after a heady and blustering youth old Mardi was at last settling down into a serene old age. But it has not so proved. Mardi's peaces are but truces. Students of history are horrorstruck at the massacres of old, but in the shambles, men are being murdered today."

These ideas are given a political emphasis:

"Now, though far and wide, to keep equal pace with the times, great reforms, of a verity, be needed, nowhere are bloody revolutions required. And though all evils may be assuaged, all evils cannot be done away. For evil is the chronic malady of the universe, and checked in one place, breaks forth in another."
The response of the Vivenzan crowd is "'Old Tory and monarchist! . . . Preaching over his benighted sermons in these enlightened times! Fool!'" The authorship of the document is left inconclusive. Melville's major characters Babbalanja, the philosopher, and King Media accuse each other of having written it, and the chapter ends, "Indeed, the settlement of this question must be left to the commentators on Mardi some four or five centuries hence." Such elusiveness makes it difficult to know how the episode is to be taken. Certainly satire is directed at the Vivenzans; the opinions Melville expressed in his later works suggest that the document represents a position very close to his. At any rate, the historical issue has been raised, and while it occupies only a small space in Mardi (about six pages in a five-hundred-page book), it gradually moves to the center of his subsequent fictions.

A year later, at work on Moby Dick, he read for the first time Hawthorne's Mosses from an Old Manse. He and Hawthorne were now neighbors; they were part of the group, including Holmes, engaged in a debate about literary nationalism. Melville, whose arguments were not reproduced in any of the five accounts recorded by participants in the debate, sides with the nationalists. His essay on Mosses was written in a few days and published in the
"Young America" liberal-nationalist magazine *Literary World* in August, 1850.

Here Melville deals with the literary-cultural aspect of American nationalism, as in *Mardi* he presented the historical-political issue. His attempt to account for the appeal of Hawthorne's work is both illuminating and extravagant. Identifying "the power of blackness" as the distinguishing characteristic of Hawthorne's art, the essay associates that blackness with "the background against which Shakespeare plays his grandest conceits."

The comparison, Melville insists, is not all to the detriment of Hawthorne, for "if Shakespeare has not been equaled, give the world time, and he is sure to be surpassed in one hemisphere or the other. . . ." Shakespeare, a commercial dramatist, was in fact hampered by his obligation to conceal truth behind "all the popularizing noise and show of broad farce," where it could be glimpsed only furtively; only in desperation and madness does a Lear tear off the mask, and speak of the horror. Hawthorne, however, points the way for an American genius to confront evil so plainly and unflinchingly that his European predecessors will appear timid. In the meantime, the new nation must prepare itself for a cultural leadership corresponding to its role as political model: "Let America first praise mediocrity even, in her children, before she
praises . . . the best excellence in the children of any other land."9

Melville seems to have made an about-face since Mardi. The essay is a curious mixture of insight and rant, prophecy and chauvinism, and not its least interesting feature is the sense of exhilaration, of creative energy conscious of its own extraordinary powers, which characterizes almost every sentence. The willingness to experience "the blackness" face to face suggests the "tragic joy" celebrated by Yeats--a confidence in the toughness and regenerative power of the human spirit. This exuberance is complemented by Melville's prediction of a new literary Golden Age of which Hawthorne is to be the central light: "And would it, indeed, appear so unreasonable to suppose that this great fullness and overflowing may be, or may be destined to be, shared by a plurality of men of genius?"10

But looked at more closely, "Hawthorne and His Mosses" shows the completion of the vision expressed in Mardi, rather than its contradiction. Melville has given his own peculiar wrinkle to the optative mood demonstrated by Emerson in "The American Scholar." Melville agrees with Emerson about the healthfulness for literature of the American political and moral climate; the new nation, with its self-assurance, its sense of unlimited possibility,
seemed the obvious place for a bold new art to flourish. Melville's advice that America first praise its own mediocrities is reminiscent of Emerson's observation, "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe." But Melville's optimism about American potentiality is checked by his consciousness of an ineradicable dark element in human nature which it is precisely the duty of the new art to reveal. The superiority of the American artist, then, lies not so much in his insights themselves as in his willingness to follow them wherever they lead.

Emerson labeled the representatives of the optative political-theological view the Party of Hope, and their adversaries the Party of Memory. But, as R. W. B. Lewis has suggested in The American Adam, a third position is possible, one taken by Hawthorne, Melville, and the elder Henry James: the party of Irony. According to Lewis, the ironic view

was characterized by a tragic optimism: by a sense of the tragic collisions to which innocence was liable (something unthinkable among the hopeful), and equally by an awareness of the heightened perception and humanity which suffering made possible (something unthinkable among the nostalgic). The impulse toward optimism and that toward pessimism hence do not cancel each other out, though they are often the
source of dramatic tension in Melville's work. Instead they constitute a unified vision—what Robert Penn Warren, in referring to the war poetry, has called "a guarded meliorism"—which appears in Melville's fiction from this time on and against which he measures American history and American ideals.

The quarter-century in which Americans achieved their political and ideological revolution, 1775-1800, absorbed a good deal of Melville's attention, for no fewer than three of his extended narratives are set during this period. The title character of *Israel Potter* participates in the Battle of Bunker Hill and the sea-fight between the Serapis and the Bon Homme Richard. Only this book is explicitly about the republic in its early days, and since the other two works are also reshapings of actual incidents, one might assume that Melville had simply carried over the dates of the original occurrences into his novels. In the case of "Benito Cereno," he followed Captain Delano's account in setting the story in 1799. Yet the moral ambiguities raised by the work (especially those connected with the "Follow your leader" motto, which is Melville's addition) suggest that he may have found Delano's recollections especially fascinating because of the perspective they provide on that era. More significantly, the event we know influenced the development
of "Billy Budd"--the hanging of a midshipman named Philip Spencer on board the American brig Somers, an execution in which Melville's cousin, Guert Gansevoort, had acted as informer and member of the drum-head court--took place in 1842. But Melville's story takes place in 1797, shortly after the Nore Mutiny, and this fact is emphasized several times by the narrator.

Though by no means identical in tone and theme, or equal in merit, these three works are interesting, in light of "Hawthorne and His Mosses," as attempts to arrive at a consciousness that will take account of the American past both in its historical uniqueness and in its revelation of the unchanging aspects of human experience. The "unique" element in them consists of the succession of historical incidents themselves; the unchanging aspect is the "power of blackness" which the incidents reveal. In Melville's last works, the war poetry and "Billy Budd," history is replaced by legend and myth. All these works examine America's tendency to invent its past; in "Billy Budd," however, the interpenetration of specific incident and myth is so extensive that American experience is subsumed in an elegiac vision of Western civilization as a whole.

Israel Potter, whose story Melville adapted from the real Potter's obscure autobiography, is a wanderer
throughout (and after) the Revolution, but his peripatetic existence is due to chance rather than choice. He becomes, in turn, a sailor, a whaling harpooner, a farmer, and finally a soldier; at Bunker Hill, he is wounded and taken captive to England. Though he escapes, he reveals his American upbringing by addressing Sir John Millet as "Mr."
Sir John nonetheless gets him a job in the King's gardens, whereupon Israel has an amusing conversation about manners with the sovereign. Soon, however, he is forced to flee when he fears he may be impressed into the King's service, and he becomes a messenger between a group of Englishmen sympathetic to America, and Benjamin Franklin, who is in Paris. In this role he meets several of the heroes of the Revolution: John Paul Jones and Ethan Allan as well as Franklin. Israel becomes a sailor upon Jones's ship, the Bon Homme Richard, and during the famous night battle with the Serapis, he is knocked accidentally on board the British ship, which takes him back to England. There he lives in poverty and despair for nearly forty years. When he returns to America, in the middle of a Fourth of July celebration, he is nearly run over by a processional car. He dies not long afterward, penniless and forgotten.

Israel Potter takes liberties with its source in order to maintain ironic distance from the Revolution and its participants, including Potter himself. Roger
McCutcheon, one student of this text and of Potter's original narrative, has estimated that two-thirds of the novel is entirely Melville's invention. Potter's memoirs, McCutcheon points out, simply note the fact of his meeting with King George, whereas Melville includes a conversation between the two in which Israel's democratic bias is emphasized: "For instance, 'Israel touched his hat--but did not remove it.' Also, he has difficulty with his republican tongue . . . in saying 'your majesty.' Now this has been developed . . . from the bare statement that the two met, and that the king knew Israel for an escaped prisoner."\textsuperscript{13} A more important example of artistic license occurs at the end of the novel. In the original version, Israel sails for America on April 5, 1823, and lands in New York after a forty-two-day voyage. Melville changes, for satiric purposes, the place and date of his arrival to Boston and July 4, 1826.

It happened that the ship, gaining her port, was moored to the dock on a Fourth of July; and half an hour after landing, hustled by the riotous crowd near Faneuil Hall, the old man narrowly escaped being run over by a patriotic triumphal car in the procession, flying a brodered banner, inscribed with gilt letters:

"BUNKER-HILL
1775
GLORY TO THE HEROES THAT FOUGHT!"\textsuperscript{14}
Such details turn Potter (a rather dull autobiographer) into a character both sympathetic and comic; they also deflate the American pretensions symbolized by July 4, for though Israel has been a participant in this and other momentous events, he dies isolated and forgotten, a victim of the same whimsical fate that once made the Americans victorious. His melancholy figure is played off the famous men of the Revolutionary period; much of the book's satiric thrust at the sanctity surrounding the past is directed especially at the less noble attributes of Founding Fathers and military heroes. Benjamin Franklin (whose conversations with Israel are, according to McCutcheon, fabricated entirely by Melville) and John Paul Jones are presented as men with a gift for self-aggrandizement. Franklin, a professional sage who uses his wit to divest Israel's room of most of its comforts, is careful to leave a copy of Poor Richard's Almanac on his guest's nightstand. Jones is addicted to romantic and dangerous schemes of revenge--he risks his sailors' lives to torch the ships at Whitehaven--and once he has successfully hectored American officials into allowing him to re-enter combat, he painstakingly cultivates his image as a gallant, as in his extravagant courtesies to Lady Selkirk. Melville's point is that both men succeed in imposing their self-images upon the national consciousness,
while Israel, whose bravery, humility, resourcefulness, and loyalty are demonstrated throughout the novel, and whose quick thinking saves Jones' reckless plan at Whitehaven, never emerges from anonymity and finally sinks into poverty—although "it may be noted, as a fact nationally characteristic, that . . . Israel, the American, never sunk below the mud, to actual beggary." 15

Melville does not treat his material solemnly—the portraits of the "great men" are often funny—but the book implicitly denies the "Adamic" view of American history. The tone throughout is resolutely anti-romantic; the caricatures of famous men are complemented by vivid and unidealized descriptions of combat. One recalls the farmers who methodically "fought their way among the furred grenadiers, knocking them right and left, as seal-hunters on the beach knock down with their clubs the Shetland seal." 16 Any impulse to mythologize events is countered by Melville's tendency to add ironic imagery or commentary. The marvelous night-battle between the Serapis and the Bon Homme Richard, introduced by the portentous image of the Man in the Moon setting down "a great yellow lamp" by which to view the contest, is undercut by a further reference to the gigantic spectator's "apishly self-satisfied leer"; the chapter ends, "In view of this battle one may ask—What separates the enlightened man from the
savage? Is civilization a thing distinct, or is it an advanced stage of barbarism?"17 At no point does the novel seriously imply a Divine Will operating through its events; rather, its emphasis is upon fortuitousness—in a series of coincidences, Israel is introduced to Jones, later rescued by him from the cutter, and finally swept from his boat by a spanker-boom. One looks in vain, the book suggests, for any pattern in history beyond those images which men invent to glorify or justify themselves. Those whose names pass into legend have successfully adopted roles, roles which may involve fakery or real heroism, cynicism and conscious falsehood, or which, on a more metaphysical plane, represent an attempt by the self to secure order against the threat of chaos. Melville writes of Jones,

The career of this stubborn adventurer signally illustrates the idea that since all human affairs are subject to organic disorder, since they are created in and sustained by a sort of half-disciplined chaos, hence he who in great things seeks success must never want for smooth water, which never was and never will be, but with what straggling method he can, dash with all his derangements at his object, leaving the rest to Fortune.18

The mask of Franklin may be conscious artifice; in the case of John Paul Jones, the mask and the man are one.

If God's blessing has been removed from the America depicted in the novel, the suggestion of progress is
likewise absent. The American experience is indeed unique, but unique only as are all events in a view which regards history as essentially meaningless. The only constants are human limitation and desire and the concomitant wish to escape, by means of legend and a religio-historical faith, the conclusion forced upon Israel in the brick-yard: "What signifies who we be, or where we are, or what we do? . . . All is vanity and clay."¹⁹ In this sense, Potter refutes the progressivist's optimism about America expressed in "Hawthorne and His Mosses." Melville, the intrepid representative American artist, is here obligated to undeceive the nation about itself. But "the power of blackness" mentioned in that essay is re-affirmed: man is a vain, corrupt, and self-deluding creature.

Despite its occasional lightness of tone, the novel consequently belongs with the other productions of the early 1850's, a period among the darkest and bitterest in Melville's career. His other fiction from this time, though less direct in its criticism of the American capacity for self-delusion, is just as incisive. In "The Encantadas" the ironic little fable "Charles' Isle and the Dog-King" depicts a new ideal society which, since it is composed of men, who are less than ideal,
inevitably dissolves in suspicion and violence. (It may be significant, too, that only the pirates, who have no sentimental attitudes about nature and man, find Barrington Isle habitable.) 20 Several shorter tales allude pessimistically to particular historical circumstances even when their implications transcend topical issues. We are told Bartleby's decline was believed to have begun while he was a clerk in the Dead Letter Office in Washington, from which he was removed because of a change in the administration; the scrivener's isolation and despair, though certainly emblematic of the failure of all nineteenth-century official values, are explicitly connected to the gradual ascendancy of a huge, "depersonalized" bureaucracy which as early as the 1850's made a mockery of American lip-service to respect for the individual. Similarly, "The Tartarus of Maids" uses the New England factory, with its depiction of women reduced to a subhuman existence, to suggest lives perverted by large, incomprehensible economic forces.

In "Benito Cereno" Melville again adapts a historical source. As with Israel Potter, he chose a book of memoirs, but this time he worked from a single chapter. He made a number of interesting changes in Amasa Delano's narrative: Delano's ship, the Perseverance, was renamed Bachelor's Delight; the slave ship changed from the Ttryal
to San Dominick; the monastic imagery, as in Delano's first view of the slave vessel, was entirely Melville's invention, as was the "follow your leader" sign. Most important, the interpretations offered by Delano and Benito are Melville's.

The monastic imagery is perhaps the most important of the story's symbolic qualities, which, as many critics have noted, reinforce the underlying identity of white man and black. At Delano's first sight of it, the San Dominick (whose name suggests the Dominican order, the "black friars" who enforced the tenets of their faith with the sword) appears "like a whitewashed monastery after a thunderstorm," populated by "dark moving figures . . . as of Black Friars pacing the cloisters." Babo's coarse, patched trousers "made him look something like a begging friar of St. Francis." The religious order is repeatedly invoked to symbolize the appearance of civilization, a caustic device which may derive from Melville's knowledge that the slave trade could only have flourished with the sanction, or at least the toleration, of the Church. At any rate, the final appearance of the image is at the very end of the tale, where the severed head of Babo, mounted on a pole, "look[s] toward St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept . . . the recovered bones of Aranda; and
across the Rimac bridge look[s] toward the monastery"²² to which Don Benito has retired for the remainder of his life. Simply by juxtaposing the shelter of the monastery with the barbarity of the Negro's execution, Melville pronounces a judgment upon "civilized" values far more devasting than the self-conscious moralizing ("Is civilization a thing distinct, or is it an advanced stage of barbarism?") of Israel Potter.

A symbolic aspect more relevant to specifically American self-esteem is that the figurehead of Christopher Columbus, discoverer of the New World, is replaced by the skeleton of the slave-trader Don Alexandro, and Babo taunts Benito by asking "whether, from its whiteness, he should not think the skeleton a white's."²³ The implication is not only that the two races are morally indistinguishable, but that the promise of the New World represented by Columbus has given way to the institutionalized evil of the slaveholder. Melville is not, in this story, concerned primarily with slavery as such, but with the way barbarism is perpetuated in the never-ending chain of violence between oppressor and oppressed, and with the innocent individual endangered by his failure to understand these human bonds of evil. America is no exception to this universal moral failure; however, Captain Delano is as much the embodiment of innocence as of American guilt.
Delano is a more ambiguous figure of innocence than Israel Potter, since he has compromised himself by his complicity, however passive, in the slave trade. His innocence is bound up with a not-so-subtle racism: he cannot conceive of slaves so cunning as to have staged the charade aboard the San Dominick. Instead, he suspects Don Benito, the representative of a "decadent" culture. Melville plays up Delano's contempt for the European; the American captain, noting Benito's "small, yellow hands," infers that "the young captain had not got into command at the hawse-hole, but the cabin-window."24 This attitude is scored off in one of the many ironic twists that characterize the tale; Delano's anti-hierarchical, anti-European prejudice is so extreme that even when Benito leaps into the departing boat, Delano assumes that the Spaniard is trying to give the impression that the boat's crew is kidnapping him. At other times Delano dismisses his suspicions of a conspiracy against him with the idea that it would be too unreasonable: "his conscience is clean."25 The additions Melville has made to the characters of Delano and Benito are to transform them into archetypal figures of America and Europe respectively: Delano is innocent and optimistic, the European all too aware of his involvement in evil. Benito's refusal, at the end of the
story, to put on the clothes of a commander reflects a repudiation of his role as slave-driver. He speaks of "the shadow of the Negro," a "power of blackness" the more terrible because Babo, the "savage," is clearly a reasoning and diabolical creature. Like Ahab, he suffers from "the woe that is madness"; Delano, who tries to cheer him with references to the beautiful weather, still lacks "the wisdom that is woe."26

The date of the events, 1799, may well have been preserved deliberately by Melville. This was twenty-one years before Congress declared involvement in the slave trade an act of piracy punishable by death; writing in 1855, Melville had an ironic perspective to supply on the supposed "golden age" of the republic. The debunking, however, is not simply of American self-esteem, but of the progressivist dream in general--the slave ship's very existence invalidates the notion of civilization's "advance."

In The Confidence Man (1857), his last work of fiction for thirty years, Melville presents his most bitter attack upon optimistic theories of human nature. Although a letter by Melville connects the book with the theme "Daily Progress of man towards a state of intellectual and moral perfection," R. W. B. Lewis has noted that
"within the novel, a belief in human perfectibility is not an active illusion; it is one of many masks or hypocrisies." Many of the characters are American comic archetypes—the Confidence Man himself is a riverboat swindler, and among his marks are a frontiersman and a Yankee peddler—and a good deal of the satire, especially in the early chapters of the book, is directed at American money-mindedness. Emersonianism takes its lumps in the character Mark Winsome and his disciple Egbert, who outmaneuver the trickster at his own game. But for all this, the book's target is larger than American innocence and self-delusion; it relies upon a number of mythic correspondence to enlarge its scope. The title character has, according to one critic or another, attributes of Satan, Vishnu, Orpheus, or Hermes. American historical consciousness as such, despite all the American folkloric elements and topical references, is hardly dealt with, for the book's primary subject is the movement of a wolfish world toward self-annihilation. The relevance here of The Confidence Man is Melville's turning to a mythic context for his events. His disillusionment is complete, and the mythic parallels are intended to put his portrayal of human gullibility and malice into a timeless perspective—human beings have been thus, and shall always be. The Confidence Man
is his *Timon of Athens*, as *Moby Dick* is, perhaps, his *Lear*, and it is only after three more decades that Christian myth, suggesting both human fallibility and dignity, appears to him an appropriate context for a tale. However, shortly after the publication of the book, Melville left on a journey to Palestine, which was to become the inspiration for his long narrative poem *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*.

From the 1850's to the 1880's, Melville's literary output was almost exclusively verse. *Clarel* appeared in 1876, and he wrote a series of lyrics during the Civil War, collected as *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866). In the latter volume the mediations upon historical process reappear, as if the convulsion the nation was passing through had jarred him into a re-examination of American destiny. In poems such as "On the Slain Collegians" and "The March into Virginia," where Melville dwells upon the poignant youthfulness and innocence of the soldiers who eagerly sacrificed themselves to war ("In Bacchic glee they file toward Fate,/Moloch's uninitiate;/Expectancy, and glad surmise/Of battle's unknown mysteries"), the conventional lament for men cut down in their youth becomes part of a larger and more terrible context: the idealism of the soldiers stands for the innocence of the American nation destroying
itself and its promise for the world. "I muse upon my country's ills," he writes in "Misgivings," "The tempest bursting from the waste of Time/On the world's fairest hope linked with man's foulest crime." The nation (the "Iron Dome" in "The Conflict of Convictions") may be "stronger for stress and strain/... But the Founder's dream shall flee." The draft riots in New York on July 11, 1863, the scene of casualties numbering nearly a thousand, provoked the bitter poem "The House­top," in which Draco is summoned to impose harsh laws upon men, who are incapable of governing themselves:

He comes, nor parlies; and the Town, redeemed, Gives thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heeds The grimy slur on the Republic's faith implied, Which holds that Man is naturally good, And--more--is Nature's Roman, never to be scourged.

The anguish of these poems has a tragic resonance that is missing from Israel Potter, "Benito Cereno," and especially The Confidence Man; the failure of America's promise inspires genuine sorrow in the poet because this promise, of a society truly founded upon equality and liberty, has culminated in bloodshed. The poem "America," which concludes the main section of Battle-Pieces and summarizes the book's important themes, expresses a "meliorism" like that implied in "Hawthorne and His Mosses"--the hope that even war and
suffering, though inescapable consequences of imperfection in the human heart, may nonetheless give way to a peace which represents a small advance in the maturity of the human race, rather than merely the completion of another lap in an eternal cycle. America, personified as a young goddess, witnesses the destruction of her children and falls into a dream of terror; when she awakens, she turns her eyes to heaven with "a clear calm look":

It spake of pain,
But such as purifies from stain--
Sharp pangs that never come again--
And triumph repressed by knowledge meet,
Power dedicate, and hope grown wise,
And youth matured for age's seat--
Law on her brow and empire in her eyes.33

But the issue which was to occupy Melville through the writing of "Billy Budd" was whether the limited wisdom that grows out of tragic conflict is worth the price of thousands of lives.

In "The Battle of Stone River, Tennessee" Melville appears to have removed his view further to a kind of unearthly detachment; he looks upon the battle as another act in a vast historical drama:
But Rosecrans in the cedarn glade,
And, deep in denser cypress gloom,
Dark Breckinridge, shall fade away
or thinly loom.
The pale throngs who in forest cowed
Before the spell of battle's pause,
Forefelt the stillness that shall dwell
On them and on their wars.
North and South shall join the train
Of Yorkist and Lancastrian.34

R. P. Warren writes of the resolution offered by the historical process here as

a sort similar to the elegiac calm of
the natural process: the act is always poised on the verge of history, the passion, even at the moment of greatest intensity, is always about to become legend, the moral issue is always about to disappear into time and leave only the human figures, shadowy now, fixed in the attitudes of the struggle.35

The heroic stances remain even when the issues that gave rise to them have been forgotten--it is a description that may well be applied to the sailors' memory of Billy at the end of "Billy Budd."

Myth and legend, because they are experiences which have become timeless, fascinate a mind aware of an immutable element in human nature. Melville had tried to create his own myth in Moby Dick, and had examined, in Israel Potter, the process by which events turned into legend. In The Confidence Man he associated his characters with Christian and Hindu mythology. "Stone River" treats legend as a means of distancing oneself from
history, at the same time elevating it to a permanent place in memory; the poet sees the passing of the battle into legend as a possibility, if a slender one, for reconciliation between the warring factions. For Melville, whose interpretation of history emphasizes the inevitability of suffering, myth allows the contemplation of events in some eternal, almost dispassionate, perspective. Billy Budd assumes a mythic dimension within the story as well as by means of it (the song "Billy Among the Darbies" immortalizes him for the sailors); it is this objectification which makes the pain of his destruction endurable for the sailors and, to some extent, for the narrator. Billy, in other words, plays out the Adamic role to its terrible conclusion and is apotheosized.

Whereas in Israel Potter history is treated as a series of incidents whose pattern, if it exists at all, cannot be discerned, the events of "Billy Budd" follow a mythic pattern. The change here is as great as that between the democratic hopefulness of the "Knights and Squires" chapter of Moby Dick and the fear of mob rule in "The House-top." That the mythic parallels of "Billy Budd" are explicitly Christian is a problem that scholars have debated since Melville's unfinished manuscript was first assembled; for the moment I wish to put that question aside to examine the development of the tale and its relation to Melville's earlier fiction.
According to Milton Stern, editor of the most recent version of the story, "Billy Budd" originated with "Billy in the Darbies," one of many poems about sailors that Melville wrote in his later years. As he did for other sea-poems (such as "John Marr"), Melville wrote a prose headnote; he became so fascinated with it, however, that the note soon expanded into a full-length work. He had written about one hundred pages of prose when he came upon an article about the Somers mutiny of 1842, an event in which his cousin Guert Gansevoort had served as a judicial officer. This article evidently caused Melville to give "Billy Budd" a new direction: from that point on, it changed emphasis from the conflict between Claggart and Billy to the inner conflict of Captain Vere.

The contrasts between characters in "Billy Budd" recall several of Melville's earlier works. Claggart and Vere are paired as are Babo and Captain Delano, the narrator of "Bartleby" and Bartleby himself, Israel Potter and John Paul Jones; in each case a humane and reasonable man is confronted by a character who embodies some demonic or irrational force. Melville is careful to indicate the irrationality of Claggart's hatred for Billy:
Now something such was Claggart, in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate, in short "a depravity according to nature."

Vere, on the other hand, is portrayed as an unusually capable commander, a man whose political conservatism is thoughtful and disinterested and who is torn between duty and affection in his decision to execute Billy. Claggart's accusation inspires in him "strong suspicion clogged by strange dubieties," a state of mind akin to that of Captain Delano aboard the San Dominick; however, Claggart is killed before Vere sounds the depths of that malignity, and the captain's ability to comprehend the "power of blackness" in the other man is left ambiguous, as Delano's is not.

We are told Vere is a "reasonable" man, with all the virtues and limitations implied by the term, and he stands for the values of a society which believes in reasonableness. In the 1950's especially, the academic trend was to take Vere ironically. However, Milton Stern argues persuasively, on the basis of his reconstruction of the text, that Melville not only intends Vere to be taken as a sympathetic and admirable character, but shares his deeply-ingrained conservatism. In Stern's opinion, Vere's last words, "Billy Budd, Billy Budd," said without
"the accents of remorse," indicate that he still feels he has done the right thing, and for us to read this passage ironically is to distort it as well as those sections (especially chapter 23) which show Vere's emotional involvement with Billy. He differs from the other officers in opposing the French Revolution not because it threatens his privileges, but because it is mistaken in its assumptions and therefore threatens the lasting peace of men. Like the Biblical Abraham, Vere has to surrender his feelings to a higher morality; no more than Abraham or Job is Vere a villain because of his obedience to law (though the law here is secular). His insistence on holding the trial immediately shows his refusal to "pass the buck"--he meets his responsibility, no matter how agonizing, for he fears that mutiny may result if the death sentence is not passed on Billy. All the evidence, in short, points to an extremely sympathetic, not ironic, view of the captain. Likewise, the view advanced by critics like Bruce Franklin, that Billy is a symbol of revolutionary consciousness, requires distortion of the narrative. Billy, to the extent that he ever emerges from his childlike, pre-conscious state, is appalled by the possibility of mutiny, and we have no reason to believe him ironic
in his blessing of Captain Vere just before the hanging.

I wish to suggest a reading which conflicts with Stern's in one important respect, yet paradoxically confirms his interpretation of the work as a whole. He remarks that Vere's decision to hold the drum-head court immediately, rather than wait for his superior officers to try Billy, is "Melville's way of indicating that Vere would meet his responsibilities no matter how repugnant and agonizing. . . . Simply, Vere refused to evade his responsibility to confront what is 'at that European conjuncture.'" However, the reader is told also of the reaction of the Bellipotent's surgeon and the other officers to Vere's decision. The surgeon is struck by Vere's "unwonted agitation" at the scene in the cabin: "No more trying situation is conceivable than that of an officer subordinate under a Captain whom he suspects to be, not mad indeed, but yet not quite unaffected in his intellect." But he says nothing of the captain's state when he reports the affair to the lieutenants and the captain of marines. Still, "They fully shared his own surprise and concern. Like him they seemed to think that such a matter should be reported to the admiral." Aside from the difficulties this chapter poses for those who read the work as an indictment of conservative values in toto (Vere cannot
be a straightforward symbol of authoritarianism if those who share his authority find his actions inexplicable), the passage raises questions about Vere's wisdom in calling for judgment so peremptorily. No one but Vere sees a serious threat of mutiny among the crew, a mutiny which the execution is designed to forestall; consequently the conduct of the trial would better have been left to those who were not personally involved in the incident. The idiosyncrasy in Vere's nature which this suggests cannot be precisely labeled, but it does suggest that even in Vere, the model officer, the irrational may disguise itself as reasonableness, with tragic results. In short, Vere himself demonstrates the fundamental defect in the human spirit which his conservative view takes for granted in its opposition to "those invading waters of novel opinion social political and otherwise."44 The soul of Claggart shows the defect magnified a thousand times into "motiveless malignity," but its very presence in Vere means that he and Claggart are, as human beings, brothers under the skin.

So it may be argued that regardless of whether Vere is taken as right or wrong in ordering Billy's execution, Stern's conclusion is valid. I have suggested that if Vere is wrong, he himself exemplifies the ineradicable flaw in even the most dutiful and temperate nature. If
we regard his decision to execute Billy as correct under the circumstances--that the crew will be encouraged to mutiny if they aren't threatened with severe punishment--the conclusion is that an innocent individual must be sacrificed to preserve order among the mass of flawed men. In either interpretation, the fundamental point is the limitations of human nature and society; the work is a conservative justification for institutionalized, traditional authority which will prevent a community of such radically imperfect creatures from degenerating into chaos.

With this in mind, I wish to propose two reasons why Melville may have emphasized the date of the tale, 1797. The simpler one is that the context of the Nore mutiny gives the captain's arguments for executing Billy more force; Melville wishes to present Vere's decision as agonizingly difficult. The second reason, one connected to the historical theme I have outlined in this essay, may be that Melville wishes the shadow of the French Revolution (and, by implication, the American one as well) to hang over the entire scene. Here a passage from the tale embroils us in textual controversy, for Melville's most explicit statement about the French Revolution is included as a preface to the whole work in the 1948 edition of F. Barron Freeman, omitted
altogether by Harrison Hayford and Merton Sealts Jr. in a 1962 version, and restored, but inserted within the text, by Milton Stern. Stern's textual reasons for including the passage are too detailed and technical to go into here, however, I find them convincing, the more because the passage does not really change what is going on elsewhere in the work, but simply brings certain issues into focus. The controversial passage is as follows:

The year 1797, the year of this narrative, belongs to a period which, as every thinker now feels, involved a crisis for Christendom not exceeded in its undetermined momentousness at the time by any other era whereof there is record. The opening proposition made by the Spirit of that Age involved the rectification of the Old World's hereditary wrongs. In France, to some extent, this was bloodily effected. But what then? Straightway the Revolution regency as righter of wrongs itself became a wrongdoer, one more oppressive than the Kings. Under Napoleon it enthroned upstart kings, and initiated that prolonged agony of Continental war whose final throe was at Waterloo. During those years not the wisest could have foreseen that the outcome of all would be what to some thinkers apparently it has since turned out to be, a political advance along nearly the whole line for Europeans.

Now, as elsewhere hinted, it was something caught from the Revolutionary Spirit that at Spithead emboldened the man-of-war's men to rise against real abuses, long-standing ones, and afterwards at the Nore to make inordinate and aggressive demands, successful resistance to which was confirmed only when the ringleaders were hung for an admonitory
spectacle to the anchored fleet. Yet in a way analogous to the operation of the Revolution at large, the Great Mutiny, though by Englishmen naturally deemed monstrous at the time, doubtless gave the first latent prompting to most important reforms in the British navy.

The implication of this gnarled commentary is that although improvement in society is possible, the attempt to perfect it, or to build a new society on "reasonable" principles, is futile; to ignore "the power of blackness" on either the personal or the political level is to invite oppression and terror. In this last work, Melville expresses the meliorist view that social advance may occur, but only gradually, and usually at the price of bloodshed. The human potential represented by Billy is real (an idea not always evident in Melville's works of the 1850's), but the "depravity by nature" typified by Claggart is equally real, and can never be eradicated; it may even be abetted, however unwillingly, by "reasonable" men like Vere.

"Billy Budd"'s allusions to the Bible and to Paradise Lost, its reference to Claggart's depravity and Billy's innocence, imply that the story is to be taken an endorsement of orthodox Christianity and that "the power of blackness" is to be identified with what Melville hesitates to call it in "Hawthorne and His
"Mosses": Original Sin. The difficulty with the interpretation of the story as Christian allegory (Claggart as Satan, Billy as Adam, Vere the Old Testament God of righteousness) is the inability of the reader to make one-to-one correspondences—Vere is unlike God insofar as he is fallible, fearful, and mortal. Also, Billy is an extremely ambiguous character. He is at once an eighteenth-century sailor, Adam, and Christ—these are incompatible roles. Moreover, Melville was, as Stern remarks, "continually, deeply, deviously, eloquently iconoclastic. He wrote 'wicked books' which, telling the truth as he saw it, left him feeling 'spotless as a lamb.'" Examples of Melville's religious attitudes are Moby Dick and Omoo, the latter of which is, "in part, an attack on established and institutionalized Christianity and evangelism." One might also refer to the evidence from "Benito Cereno" I have cited, and to "Bartleby," whose narrator feels his conventional Christianity threatened by what Bartleby represents: "I did not accomplish the purpose of going to Trinity Church that morning. Somehow the things I had seen disqualified me for the time from church-going." Had Melville then changed his mind about this issue, just as he had about meaning in history? It may be precisely the Christian allusions that indicate
his unease at the traditional explanations of Christian doctrine; his attitude requires a modification of scriptural authority. Christ's sacrifice, according to church doctrine, is an all-encompassing act of salvation; it presupposes what Erich Auerbach, in his discussion of medieval drama, has called "the figural interpretation of history": all events are part of one great drama whose beginning is God's creation of the world, whose climax is Christ's Incarnation and Passion, and whose expected conclusion will be Christ's second coming and the Last Judgment. . . . There is but one place--the world; and but one action--man's fall and redemption.49

The crucifixion is thus sufficient in the sense that it compensates for all sinfulness until the end of time; no further sacrifice is necessary. But Melville superimposes Christian myth on fictional incident to emphasize that Christ's Passion was inadequate, for at each state of history the destruction of innocence and the innocent takes place again; the world must undergo moral convulsion again and again as the price of historical advance. (In this tale the death of Billy is linked to the captain's fears of what the Revolution represents.) It is as if Melville believes in Original Sin, but has given up hope of a single, sufficient redemption.50 I have said that the mythicizing of events allows some detachment from them, but one might also say that the myth replaces one's grief
for Billy with sorrow for the human race generally.

Melville's consciousness of "the power of blackness" is the great antithesis to the Adamic views propounded by his contemporaries; our century has forced us to contemplate political evil on a scale undreamt of even by Melville.51 The works I have discussed show that Melville is not interested in creating costume drama, but in exploring philosophical questions about history, and this developing preoccupation gives his output unity. My argument is not that ideology per se is desirable in historical fiction—it is easy to imagine a series of books written to illustrate a vapid or pernicious theory of history—but that Melville's effort to address these issues in fiction that does justice to their complexity represents an exemplary artistic achievement. Though not a masterpiece, Israel Potter transforms its material into a unified and trenchant satire on American beliefs and institutions. The other works, though more concerned with "human nature" in its eternal aspect, still show how a particular time and place may be made integral to a work of fiction.

American historical novelists have made few attempts, however, to follow Melville's example. Until recently, Israel Potter was virtually unknown to all but Melville specialists, and the shorter works, though continually
admired and studied, have been read for reasons other than their embodiment of his views on history. Of the writers discussed in this essay, only Janet Lewis, as I have shown, has tried to investigate, in a series of books, an important theme, and her novels were not influenced by Melville's. It is all the more revealing, then, to look next at two twentieth-century books that also profess an interest in large historical issues, to see how they resemble or differ from Melville's in technique and implication. For contrast with Israel Potter, I have chosen another book that takes an unusual perspective on the American Revolution--Kenneth Roberts's Oliver Wiswell. The other, William Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner, treats a slave rebellion, as does "Benito Cereno"--a rebellion, coincidentally, that took place during Melville's lifetime.
CHAPTER III NOTES

1Harry B. Henderson devotes a long and provocative chapter to Melville in Versions of the Past. He and I agree that a preoccupation with history marks Melville's work from Mardi through "Billy Budd," and many of his comments on these pieces are enlightening. See, for example, his comparison of "Benito Cereno"'s Amasa Delano to the actual man (their views of slavery, he argues, are completely different), or his discussion of Israel Potter's use of documents (a method which anticipates that of William Carlos Williams's In the American Grain, published seventy-five years later). These passages appear on pp. 150-4 and 140-1, respectively, in Versions. However, his insistence on marking so much revolve around his key terms "holist" and "progressive" complicates unnecessarily an already complex subject. The section on Israel suffers from this, in Henderson's efforts to show it as a transitional work in American literature—a work written from a holist social vision which nevertheless manifests some of the characteristics of progressivism, in his sense. The chapter on "Billy Budd" presents some interesting views on Melville's allusion to Admiral Nelson, the names of the ships in which Billy is billeted, and the "frame of acceptance" in which the whole story must be read. Yet Henderson confuses matters further by introducing more opposed terms, especially the contrast between Burke's and Paine's visions of the French Revolution; the air is thick with dichotomies. He is also mistaken, I believe, in attributing Paine's optimistic view of human nature to Melville, as I hope the rest of my chapter makes clear. Though he gives some convincing evidence that Captain Vere acts wrongly, it does not necessarily follow that Melville therefore rejects traditional values in favor of radicalism. Furthermore, Henderson was working with the Hayford-Sealts text of "Billy," which omits the prefatory material included in F. Barron Freeman's edition and restored in Milton Stern's (though Stern places this material within the text). Thus it is easier for him to claim that Melville rejects gradualism in historical matters. My argument, which follows Stern's, is that Melville takes precisely this position, as the following pages will demonstrate.

For this summary of political thought in America and France during the post-Revolutionary period I am indebted to Professor Arthur Mann, Department of History, the University of Chicago.

Vespasian's remark is recorded by Suetonius in his Lives of the Twelve Caesars.

My examples of the "solutions" to the problem of creating a native American literature come from Benjamin T. Spencer, The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign (Syracuse University Press, 1957). The comments of Sumner et al. may be found on p. 124. John Neal, who proposed a new American metrics, is discussed on pp. 130-4; Bryant and Longfellow, who would do away with British songbirds, on p. 86; and Cooper, the champion of American political ideals, on pp. 121-2.


These quotations are from Herman Melville, Mardi: and a Voyage Thither, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1970). The first is from p. 525; the next two may be found on p. 529, the last on p. 530.


Ibid., p. 203.


Lewis, pp. 7-8.


15 Ibid., p. 215.

16 Ibid., p. 30.

17 Ibid., pp. 163, 172.

18 Ibid., p. 152.

19 Ibid., p. 205.


22 Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," in Billy Budd, Sailor. Page references are 219, 231, and 307, respectively.

23 Ibid., p. 295.

24 Ibid., p. 232.

25 Ibid., p. 256.

26 These words are Melville's; they come at the end of the "Try-Works" chapter of Moby-Dick, ed. Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1964), p. 543.

27 Lewis quotes this letter in his "Afterword" to The Confidence Man (New York: Signet Books, 1964), p. 262; his comment appears on p. 263.
Daniel Hoffman, in Form and Fable in American Fiction (1961; rept. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1975), pp. 289-310, discusses the idea that the Confidence Man is Satan or the Anti-Christ; he also compares the book to Melville's other work, including Israel Potter. R. W. B. Lewis, in his "Afterword" to the edition already cited, argues on pp. 269-70 for the titular hero as an American analogue to Hermes. H. Bruce Franklin contends not only that the book is permeated by Christian myth and Biblical allusion, but that "one of the great achievements of The Confidence Man is its way of relating the principal Western myths to all other kinds of fiction." See his introduction to The Confidence Man (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967), pp. xxv-xxvii, and his notes to the text, passim.

Herman Melville, Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), p. 23.

Ibid., p. 13.

Ibid., p. 17.

Ibid., p. 87.

Ibid., p. 162.

Ibid., p. 74.


This paragraph follows Stern's argument in his introduction to Billy Budd Sailor: An Inside Narrative, ed. Stern (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. ix-x.

"Billy Budd," Stern edition, p. 61. All subsequent references to "Billy" will be from this edition.

Ibid., p. 89.

See, for example, the following articles: Richard Harter Fogle, "Billy Budd--Acceptance or Irony," Tulane Studies in English, 8 (1958), 107-13; Wendell Glick, "Expedience and Absolute Morality in 'Billy Budd,' " PMLA, 68 (1953), 103-10; and Karl E. Zink, "Herman Melville and the Forms--Irony and Social Criticism in 'Billy Budd,' " Accent, 12 (1952), 131-9.
Melville, "Billy Budd," p. 132.

Stern, passim, and pp. xxvii-ix.

Ibid., p. ix.

Melville, "Billy Budd." Both quotations are from p. 96.

Ibid., p. 36.

See Stern's appendix to his edition, pp. 152-5, for details.


Stern, p. xvii.

"Bartleby," in Beaver's edition of the tales, p. 79.


Cf. F. O. Matthiessen's remarks about Melville: "He recognized the inadequacy of transcendentalism on most of the essential problems; but when he tried to reassert the significance of Original Sin, there was no orthodoxy that he could accept. . . . [Calvinism's] determinism became for him the drastic distortion that he projected in Ahab's career, wherein there was no possibility of regeneration since there remained no effectual faith in the existence of divine grace." American Renaissance (1941; rept. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 458.

The coincidental correspondence between Melville's ideas and those of modern thinkers is often remarkable. For instance, Richard L. Rubenstein, in his superb book about the Jewish Holocaust, The Cunning of History: Mass Death and the American Future (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), draws this conclusion from his study: "It is an error to imagine that civilization and savage cruelty are antitheses. On the contrary, in every organic process, the antitheses always reflect a unified totality, and civilization is an organic process. Manind never emerged out of savagery into civilization. . . . In our times the cruelties, like most other aspects of our world,
have become far more effectively administered than ever before. They have not and they will not cease to exist. Both creation and destruction are inseparable aspects of what we call civilization" (p. 92). A few pages later Rubenstein writes, "This book is the result of one political conservative's attempt to reassess his views on politics and society in the aftermath of Watergate and the Nixon presidency. Hence a word about political conservatism may be in order. Such a philosophy ought not to be equated with the defense of special privilege or the unrestricted acquisition of scarce resources by the few at the expense of the many. . . . It would also seem that a responsible conservative government would seek to mitigate rather than exacerbate the worst inequities of condition and status within society" (pp. 95-6).
CHAPTER IV
TWO BESTSELLERS:  OLIVER WISWELL AND
THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

Oliver Wiswell and The Confessions of Nat Turner are alike in presenting unconventional views of American history and in reaching the best-seller list—the former was sixth or seventh on the fiction list for two years (1940-1), while Nat Turner not only sold very well in 1967, but had its success certified by a Pulitzer prize. Otherwise, however, these two works appear to have little in common, either in their treatment of the past or their place in the author's career. Wiswell is one of a series of best-selling fictions by Kenneth Roberts (all are grounded in American history, especially the colonial period); my choice of it rather than, say, Arundel or Northwest Passage might be arbitrary except for its value as contrast to Melville's Israel Potter. Styron's book marked a departure for its author, who seems, in its preface, to be embarrassed about writing a "historical novel" at all: "Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a
work that is less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history."

Though Oliver Wiswell may typify certain formulaic aspects of commercial fiction, it has virtues which enrich the simplicity of its narrative pattern. Nat Turner, on the other hand, is more often ambitious than successful in its approach to the problem of slavery and its creation of a self-conscious black narrator. (Both books are narrated in the first person.) But an examination of the two works in light of each other and of Melville's achievement may reveal something about differing conceptions of the integration of history and fiction; since Roberts' book represents the more conventional method, I shall begin with it.

The eponymous narrator of Oliver Wiswell is a professional historian—an unusual occupation for the protagonist of a best-selling historical novel. He is also the son of Seaton Wiswell, an eminent lawyer in colonial Massachusetts, and an important Loyalist—a friend of Governor Hutchinson, Daniel Delaney, and Samuel Seabury. The book begins with Oliver's rescue of Thomas Buell, a Loyalist printer and odd-job man, from a mob of rebels who have tarred and feathered Buell for his pro-British sentiments. Not long afterward, Oliver, his father, and Buell are forced by the rebels to flee to Boston, their
property confiscated; especially wounding to Oliver is that he must also leave his beloved, Sally Leighton, whose family has joined the rebels. In Boston the Wiswells watch in horror as the British are crushed at Bunker Hill and as the city gradually, through the incompetence of British generals, falls into rebel hands. The family is eventually forced to emigrate to Nova Scotia, and at this point Oliver's adventures really begin. He leads the capture of a rebel ship on the way to Halifax, and as a result, is dispatched to Long Island by General Howe to reconnoiter with other Loyalists, who have gone into hiding, and help prepare for an attack on a rebel fort. Because of further delay and blundering by the British commanders, the rebels, led by Washington, manage to escape from the fort after being routed in previous battles. Oliver and Buell are then sent to England and Paris to obtain information about rebel privateer captains who are interfering with Howe's supply ships. Here again they do a creditable job which is frustrated by the ignorance or indolence of higher-ups. The two men soon find themselves on the Wilderness Trail, where they are charged with discovering rebel plans for organizing resistance to British rule in the South, and they are involved in a harrowing defense of the key fortress, the Ninety-six. But their efforts are undermined again by bureaucratic and
military ineptitude. Corwallis is forced to surrender at Yorktown, the king feels obliged to make peace with the colonists, and the Loyalists are now unwilling expatriates. Thanks to the intercession of a new and enlightened commander-in-chief, Oliver is appointed royal commissioner in Canada, and there he goes with Buell and Sally, who has remained true to him throughout the war.

This summary cannot, of course, include all the incidents which add variety to the main narrative; the book is seldom tedious, despite its considerable length (nearly eight hundred pages). A recurrent threat to Oliver and his friends is a clever and vicious supply officer, Cunningham, who represents the worst aspects of the British military system; he arranges for the murder of Sally Leighton's brother Soame. On his mission to the South, Oliver is temporarily distracted from his passion for Sally by a Southern belle. Buell is continually involved in comic escapades, such as selling phony "Metallic Tractors" (for curing all ailments except hangover) to the rebels.

This wealth of incident disturbed some reviewers of the book. Allan Nevins wrote, "This book has a sprawling quality which results in thin and unconvincing passages. His scenes in Paris and perhaps even in London might better have been left out." Max Gissen commented,
"Oliver Wiswell is simply a huge string of events . . . which have been selected and shaped to prove the Loyalist cause." He goes on to complain that Oliver and his associates are moved around by Roberts with devices that "actually fall short of the average of invention in pulp magazines. . . . At one point most of them come together in Paris, Mr. Roberts having simply decreed that they attach themselves to the British spy system." And he criticizes the author's stagily arranging for Oliver to see every important battle from a hill or a gun emplacement, as if the war were a pageant.3

Of course, the book is unified, as Gissen points out, by a theme (or perhaps a group of themes): the righteousness of the Loyalist cause, the depravity of the rebels, and the corruption or incompetence of the British administration. This topsy-turvy view of the Revolution constitutes the book's "controversial" dimension. However, I hope to show that this inversion of sympathies adds only a little to the impact of the book, since it is more or less neutralized by the banality of its narrative pattern. Thus, although I wish to comment eventually on the persuasiveness of Roberts' case for the Tories, I feel that a consideration of the work's genre must come first; the structure of the book is explicable in such a context.
Oliver Wiswell belongs to a genre that John G. Cawelti, in his analysis of formulaic fiction, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, calls "the best-selling social melodrama." Cawelti describes the defining characteristics of this genre as follows:

It synthesizes the archetype of melodrama with a carefully and elaborately developed social setting in such a way as to combine the emotional satisfactions of melodrama with the interest inherent in a detailed, intimate, and realistic analysis of major social or historical phenomena. The structural characteristics of this formulaic type involve interweaving of the patterns of melodrama with a particular set of current events or social institutions, the result being a complex double effect: the social setting is often treated rather critically with a good deal of anatomizing of the hidden motives, secret corruption, and human folly underlying certain events or institutions; yet the main plot works out in proper melodramatic fashion to affirm, after appropriate tribulations and suffering, that God is in his heaven and all's right with the world.4

Social melodramas may be set in the present as well as the past--this chapter of Cawelti's book, in fact, focuses on Irving Wallace--and they do not have the fixed patterns of character and action or of situation and setting that identify other formulaic genres (the detective story, or the western). However, all works in this category share the appeal of combining "the escapist satisfactions of melodrama--in particular, its fantasy of a moral universe
following conventional social values—with the pleasurable feeling that we are learning something important about reality." Two other important ingredients in the social melodrama are its simplification of character ("effective melodramatic incident tends to stress single and direct emotions rather than complex explorations of motive and significance") and its reliance upon a succession of crises or spectacles for its narrative interest.

My summary of Oliver Wiswell's plot has, I hope, indicated its reliance upon crisis. Oliver is a witness of or participant in many of the important battles of the Revolution. While it is true that great novels also may include spectacle, their emphasis is different. As Cawelti suggests, Tolstoy, for instance, focuses upon very few such crises, whereas a social melodramatist presents a succession of them. It is this quality of continual plot-interest that makes a book like Oliver Wiswell "compulsively readable": any quiet scene is likely to be disrupted by or contrasted with turmoil a few pages later.

It is true, also, that in choosing to emphasize spectacle, Roberts skimps on character development. He tries to add dramatic interest by making Sally Leighton's family ardent rebels violently opposed to her romance with Oliver, but Sally herself is (rather improbably)
true to him throughout the conflict. She is a "pallid and proper" heroine whose letters to Oliver are among the novel's embarrassing moments. Oliver himself is loyal, generous, temperate, brave, efficient, clever, and eloquent; a small triumph of the book is that usually he does not seem an insufferable prig. His politics are moderate. Not an enthusiastic monarchist, he still supports the Galloway Plan for a "practicable and permanent" union of the colonies and Great Britain. A characteristic remark is

"I haven't lost any liberty yet under English rule, but I've lost plenty of it under the rule of Americans. . . . And from what I know of the Sons of Liberty, there's no part of these colonies where freedom of speech hasn't been suppressed, the liberty of the press destroyed, and the voice of truth silenced--not by legal means, but by the orders of self-appointed and ignorant committeemen and by little mobs of lawless and equally ignorant men!"7

About the only failing of which he convicts himself is naiveté--naiveté about the intentions of the rebels, the glory of war, or the competence of the British command.

I admitted to myself what I'd never have admitted at the beginning of the war--that every war is brought about by mediocrities who always insist they're right, and seldom are; that all wars are prolonged because rulers and cabinet ministers are stupid, stubborn, vindictive, shortsighted and timid.8
The other characters are similarly one-dimensional, flatteringly described if they are rich, educated Loyalists, portrayed acidly if they are rebels or British military men. The only anomalous figure in the Loyalist ranks is Oliver's sidekick, Buell, who is neither rich nor educated; however, his cleverness in outwitting the rebels compensates for these disadvantages. Furthermore, he is a comic character whose "flatness" is exactly suited to his role in the narrative.9

The melodramatic pattern can easily be discerned in such characterizations: the Loyalists are victims, the rebels their oppressors. The opening scene typifies the work, for Buell's tarring and feathering (the description is particularly horrifying) is the result merely of his having printed some Loyalist pamphlets. Thus the rebel mob's brutality is shown as completely incommensurate with the offense; its extra-legal methods are reprehensible as Buell's actions are not. When Oliver isn't betraying class bias against the revolutionaries, who are depicted as vulgar as well as fanatical, he is attributing the lowest self-interested motives to them:

"[L]ook at John Hancock. . . . He threw away his father's fortune! He's been treasurer of Harvard College, but he can't account for £15,000 of Harvard's money! He's £100,000 in debt to the government for smuggling! If he can't overthrow this government and its laws, he'll be ruined!"10
Such a presentation suggests, of course, that characters and events have been very carefully selected—that, in fact, Roberts is writing a counter-revolutionary tract. Not only the despised or the dispossessed were part of the vanguard of the Revolution; Roberts simply omits or downplays such highly placed and gifted rebels as John Adams or James Otis. Also, as Max Gissen has pointed out, Roberts ignores the agrarian revolt sparked by a proclamation in 1763 which placed a moratorium on expansion into new land by small farmers; these farmers realized that their economic survival depended upon their power to expand, and eventually took up arms to protect their independence. These people were hardly equivalent to the urban mobs whom Roberts represents as quintessential rebels.¹¹ So the novel is weak historically as well as aesthetically.

Having said these unkind things about Oliver Wiswell, one should pay tribute to its virtues, as well. The book is still readable forty years after its first publication, an unusual merit in a "best-selling social melodrama." One reason is that Roberts does not attempt a pastiche of eighteenth-century style; the prose is not distinguished, but it is relatively simple and straightforward, so that a reader is not continually jarred by its awkwardness. Another reason is Roberts' skill at describing action.
The battle scenes are extremely vivid, sometimes exciting, even if the author does have to resort to unlikely stratagems to get Oliver in the best position to view them.

The book is thus historical melodrama of a fairly accomplished kind, but it remains melodrama. Roberts is not quite so crude as to apportion destinies strictly according to merit—the proud and brave Soame Leighton is surreptitiously murdered, and the blackguard Captain Cunningham escapes punishment for his crimes—but the major sympathetic characters are all alive and thriving at the novel's end, thus satisfying the reader's sense that, as Cawelti says, "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world." Oliver does claim, on the last page, that he doesn't understand the workings of Providence: "Perhaps war, pestilence, storms that send men to sudden, heroic, unremembered death—perhaps that's how God slowly sculptures the world to a shape that'll always be concealed from us..." But Sally replies, "For us [a great event] has come already." An unintentional irony, perhaps, lies in the discrepancy between these tepid sentiments and the injustice and suffering that have been so powerfully presented in the rest of the book. We could probably admire Oliver Wiswell more if we felt the irony was deliberate, in order to undermine Sally's attitudes, or to suggest that their situation, compared
to that of other Loyalists, is exceptionally fortunate.
But deliberate irony is unlikely, since Sally is consistently presented as noble and clear-sighted, and since the note of triumph which marks the whole concluding chapter seems meant to help us forget what has gone before.
Oliver's words are intended to make him seem even more noble; he is represented as a complex being whose suffering has caused him to grow in knowledge of good and evil. Instead, he sounds embarrassingly sententious.

Because of its melodramatic "plottiness," the book is finally "controversial" in only a mild way. Once one has adjusted to the role reversals (Tory = good; rebel = bad), Oliver Wiswell offers few challenges to one's expectations. The narrative structure is familiar, the "insights" into the hidden motives for war are predictable, and the characterizations are shallow. The formulaic elements, in other words, work against whatever threat to our complacency the premise offers. Of the original reviewers, only Max Gissen was offended by Roberts' slant on the Revolution; the others found it merely "interesting."
This may indicate a praiseworthy open-mindedness about Roberts' attempt to debunk American mythology, but it is equally possible that the book illustrates the tendency of best-selling historical melodramas to raise only enough "controversy" to provide a narrative "hook," so
that any dangerous issues can be bypassed altogether or resolved at the novel's close.

The difference between Oliver Wiswell's superficial "controversiality" and a more complex view of the Revolution may be demonstrated by comparing it to Israel Potter. Israel, one must grant, is not a masterpiece. Many of its characters (for example, Benjamin Franklin) are little more than comic turns, the irony is occasionally facile (Israel as an old man is nearly run over by celebrants of the Revolution's anniversary), and Melville's voice is sometimes annoyingly obtrusive (as in the Bon Homme Richard episode). But Melville is not afraid to pursue his dark reflections about historical process to their logical conclusion. The difference is not that only one author has a consistent thematic interest in writing about the Revolution, for both Roberts and Melville display this. But one might compare Roberts to a lawyer determined to make the best case for his defendant, whereas Melville is a philosopher, to whom history appears in all its ambiguity. In Israel, the good, the brave, and the patriotic are often unrewarded; heroism is not always distinguishable from megalomania; the colonial victory, individual suffering, and history generally, may or may not have any "meaning."

Cawelti makes a similar distinction between War and Peace and the best-known American historical melodrama, Gone With the Wind.
In Gone with the Wind, the Civil War and its aftermath create the circumstances that judge and punish Scarlett for her selfish vanity and overweening egotism, while at the same time they challenge her to move in the direction of a new strength and vitality. In War and Peace, however, the relation between public events and private morality is a more complex dialectic. Even though Prince Bezukhov does find a kind of salvation, it is not by taking a role in the public spectacle but by turning his back on it. The war remains an enigmatic and amoral circumstance in relation to the individual lives of the characters, despite all of Tolstoy's ruminations on historical forces.13

Whereas Oliver's omnipresence becomes an increasingly awkward plot device, Israel's wanderings are an illustration of Melville's point about the role of chance in history and the homelessness of men in this world. Roberts the advocate piles up evidence of indignities to prove his characters are innocent victims; Melville regards not only Israel, but even those who seem to have triumphed over circumstances, as the sport of a mysterious universe. Perhaps twentieth-century readers are inclined anyway toward ironic works like Israel Potter, so that our preference for it reflects our taste more than its merit; even so, it is hard not to conclude that the ending of Oliver Wiswell is manufactured in a way Israel's is not, and that the latter avoids the clichés of formulaic fiction (the inevitable love interest, the loyal sidekick) which Oliver relies upon so heavily.
Even a superficial reading of The Confessions of Nat Turner reveals many differences in intention and method from Oliver Wiswell. Instead of a sweeping view of a whole revolution, Nat Turner focuses on a single historical event, the abortive Virginia slave uprising of 1831. Both books employ very mannered first-person narrators, but Roberts' is a well-educated New England aristocrat, Styron's a self-educated slave. Oliver is presented as a moderate, a reasonable man caught up in irrational events, while Turner is the victim and instigator of irrationality, an obsessive and bloodthirsty religious fanatic. The narrative structure of Oliver is straightforward, while Nat Turner scrambles chronology, beginning with Turner in his death cell and ending, after numerous excursions into his past, with his execution. Finally, although both books were immediate best-sellers, the controversy about Oliver Wiswell was restricted to one or two reviewers; Nat Turner inspired an entire volume of essays by black writers protesting Styron's use of historical material, and the other reviews ranged from reverential to denunciatory.

Because the book appeared in 1967, a period of considerable racial unrest, much of the controversy was due to the characterization of Turner, for reasons I shall discuss presently. Even those who were less troubled by
Turner differed sharply about the book's purely literary merit. Philip Rahv wrote, "This is a first-rate novel, the best that William Styron has written and the best by an American writer that has appeared in some years." To Richard Gilman, Nat Turner seemed "a mediocre novel, not a beautiful or even well-written work of fiction which happens to contain historical inaccuracies or perversions of historical truth."  

The book can thus be regarded in several ways; Styron himself feels that it can be judged both as history and as fiction, or at least that he has stayed well within the historical record. One must then know more about the real Turner to judge Styron's accomplishment, since a number of things in the novel are extrapolations from what is known.

The novel's principal source is a pamphlet of the same title, published in 1831. This document is primarily the record of an interview between Turner and Thomas R. Gray, a white Southampton County lawyer, held a few days after Turner's capture. Though not officially involved in the case, Gray (who also appears in Styron's book) put in a preface "to the public" and recounted Turner's story, he claimed, in the slave's own words. (At times the language, as several commentators have pointed out, belies this claim. It is unlikely, for example, that Turner
would have said "we found no more victims to gratify our thirst for blood."\textsuperscript{16} The "confession" begins with Nat's belief that, from an early age, he was marked out for prophecy; he remembers that as a child of three or four he began to tell stories of things that had happened before he was born, and that his relatives realized he was destined for some great purpose. An unusually quick-witted child, he easily learned to read and write, which earned him the respect of the black community. Upon reaching manhood, he had his first religious experience; a spirit spoke to him, saying, "Seek ye the Kingdom of Heaven, and all things shall be added unto you." He soon ran away from his master for thirty days, but returned to be chastened, at the Spirit's prompting. He then saw a vision of white and black spirits engaged in battle, the sun darkened and blood flowing in streams; he heard, "Such is your luck, such are you called to see; and let it come, rough or smooth, you must surely bare [sic] it." From various signs, such as drops of blood on ears of corn, Turner said he realized the day of judgment was at hand. On May 12, 1828, the Spirit told him that the Serpent was loosened, and that Turner would have to take on the yoke of Christ to fight against it. (Gray reports that at this point in the narrative he asked Turner, "Do you not find yourself mistaken now?" Turner replied,
"Was not Christ crucified?" On the appearance of a sign--an eclipse of the sun--he was to arise and slay his enemies with their own weapons. Turner communicated the news of his great work to the four slaves in whom he had the most confidence, and on August 21 the group finally met in the woods, their numbers increased by two other slaves, Will and Jack. The rebellion began at the home of Turner's master, Joseph Travis. Turner explained that he failed to kill his master because the room was too dark; Travis had to be dispatched by Will. Another attempt at murder failed because Turner's sword was too dull. His only victim was Margaret Whitehead, the daughter of a neighboring planter, and he killed her with a fence rail when the sword failed again. For strategic reasons he did not enter the other victims' houses until the other slaves had murdered the inhabitants.

Within half a day Turner's troops numbered fifty or sixty, "all mounted and armed with guns, axes, swords, and clubs." About three miles from the town of Jerusalem (Turner's penultimate destination, since it contained an armory), the rebels met armed resistance from whites. Here Turner lost more than half of his men, who were wounded or were frightened into fleeing, and he had to abandon his plan to advance to the town until he could gather more recruits. But his new troops, accumulated
from neighboring farms, also panicked and dispersed at the threat of an attack. By the time Turner and his lieutenants returned to an estate they had ravaged the day before, groups of whites were patrolling it, and he was deserted by all but two men. Even these two, sent out to rally more volunteers, failed to return, and their general, seeing that nothing more was to be done at that time, went into hiding. Meanwhile, his troops were being captured. By the time the rebels were subdued, fifty-five whites had been killed.

Turner supplied himself with provisions from Travis's estate, scratched a hole under a pile of fence rails, and concealed himself there for six weeks, leaving only at night to get water. Eventually a dog discovered meat in this hideout, and led other slaves to the spot a few days later; they evidently betrayed him, for he was pursued a fortnight until captured by Benjamin Phipps, who, armed with a shotgun, forced him out of a cave near the Travis household. Turner was armed only with "a small, light sword," which he immediately surrendered, begging that his life be spared.

Gray commented at the end of the pamphlet, "He can read and write. . . . and for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, is surpassed by few men I have seen." Perhaps the most memorable passage in the
document, though, is Gray's description of Turner during his narrative:

The calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm, still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him; clothed with rags and covered with chains; yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man; I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins.

In Styron's opinion, this document and a tendentious work called The Southampton Insurrection, by William S. Drewry (1900), are the only important sources for Turner's story, and his novel follows them in broad outline, though the battles occupy much less space, proportionately, in his novel than in the pamphlet. (He is more interested in Turner's motivation.) In an article in Harper's, Styron had almost nothing to say about the official records of the trial: "I had already been reliably informed that [the Southampton Court records] would prove unrewarding." In another article describing how he gathered material for the book, he said that to his surprise there wasn't anything to speak of . . . there were a few little newspaper clippings of the time, all of them seemingly sort of halfway informed and hysterical and probably
not very reliable. And then there was the single book [The Southampton Insurrection]... a biased book of considerable information and detail, and valuable to that degree.21

In response to an interview question by George Plimpton about his research, Styron answered, "What there is to know about Nat Turner can be learned in a single day's reading."22

Styron has informed us in the preface that where we have little knowledge regarding Turner, he has allowed himself "the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events," like Hawthorne in "The Custom-House" and Janet Lewis in the prefaces to her books. But while one may accept, in fiction, inventions about a given character (and, as we shall see, Styron has invented boldly), historical context can be a problem in a work which attempts to "recreate a man and his era."23 We usually ask of fictions set in remote times and places that they observe some conventions in the presentation of these worlds--the author is obliged to avoid anachronism, refrain from inventing or altering large public events that are part of the historical record, and have his characters speak in a style appropriate to the period.

Styron is careful about verisimilitude in some respects. Martin Duberman, the historian of the ante-bellum South, has written, "There is nowhere available a
more richly patterned, evocative account of day-to-day life in the impoverished Virginia countryside around the year 1830. "24 That is, Nat Turner exhibits the "circumstantial realism" of detail that we associate with conventional historical fiction. However, Styron says of Turner's language,

I didn't strive to write like a nineteenth-century preacher. I tried to write as spontaneously as I could in the form and language I would have written a contemporary novel, at every point, of course, trying to avoid obvious anachronisms like slang phrases and figures of speech which are peculiarly twentieth-century. 25

He justifies this partly by saying that nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary style are quite similar—an assertion for which he offers little evidence.

Nat's language is thus among Styron's most daring decisions. Even Melville never attempted to enter the mind of his slave rebel, Babo, in "Benito Cereno," and Styron's audacity extends to the construction of the book so that most of it is virtually unbroken monologue. Contrary to his remarks in interviews, the style of this monologue is redolent of the nineteenth century. It is often grandiose (Turner's vocabulary includes such words as "presage" and "effulgent"), with lengthy, convoluted sentences echoing Biblical phrasing or reflecting oratorical devices.
My thoughts stray outdoors once more where the brilliant fuss of chattering birds intrudes in the fading day—blackbirds and robins, finches and squawking jays, and somewhere far off above the bottomlands the noise of some mean assembly of crows, their calls echoing venturesome and conniving and harsh.26

Such style resembles that of the lawyer Gray.

The critical reaction to this language was mixed. While most of the black critics denounced it, two of them (John A. Williams and J. O. Killens) described it as "sometimes inspired" or "beautiful,"27 and some of the rudest remarks about its excesses came from Wilfrid Sheed, a white critic who had some kind words about the book:

The tone is often closer to late-Victorian than early-Victorian. "For many years it had been my habit. . . ." "Thus my duties, compared to what I had been used to, were light and fairly free of strain." It reminds one of the novels that begin "When I was a boy at the turn of the century." And how about this for honest muttonchop indignation? "It was plain now that the sight of the dying child had caused even his adamantine heart to be smitten by guilt." Or for elegance of feeling, what about this tribute to a lady's hand? "That soothing many-fingered delicacy." One hears the voice of W. C. Fields fading away on that line. . . .28

In one of the best defenses of the book's prose, Philip Rahv cites Faulkner:
To have attempted to "imitate" Turner's own restricted idiom, whatever it was, would have sufficed to render the theme in only one dimension. Styron's strategic decision to employ the rich verbal resources at his command was the right one. . . . In the same way Faulkner bypassed in As I Lay Dying Darl's native speech in favor of his own, which alone was capable of adequately representing that character's clairvoyance and singularity of consciousness.29

One might ask, though, if context again does not make a difference. Turner's voice has to be sustained at much greater length and in a greater variety of circumstance, so that its artificiality is more pronounced. Also, Styron wants to recreate a very specific time and place as part of his narrative.

Despite these problems, and the occasional failures Sheed cites, the prose does have several advantages. It is different enough from most contemporary prose (pace Styron) to give the reader a sense of historical and psychological distance from the character. Sentences which suggest oratory are appropriate for a preacher, and their complicated structure often effectively conveys the brooding, obsessive quality of Turner's thoughts. Finally, it is important to remember that Styron's intention is to re-create a man of anomalous status (an educated slave) and to show him as ambivalent. The jarring difference between his "interior" language and the dialect
he speaks to the other blacks emphasizes his isolation from them, the uneasy quality of his status. (No doubt this sense of isolation is also the reason Styron plays up the role of Turner's white family in his early development, despite the historical evidence.)

But if one can accept, with reservations, this language, the characterization of Turner is still a problem. On the one hand, too many facts have been altered, or interpreted very freely, for the character to be historically authentic; on the other, Styron has not done enough to make him a completely satisfactory fictional creation.

Styron's Turner is a house servant educated and cosseted by his master, contemptuous of the ignorant "field niggers," yet consumed by hatred of whites and convinced that his destiny is to take up arms against them. He is racked by crises of confidence, and during the uprising he is unable to kill anyone except Margaret Whitehead--one of Styron's most controversial inventions is his portrayal of this murder as partly motivated by Turner's frustration at being unable to possess her sexually. (The fictional Turner is also involved in a homosexual episode with another slave just before his first attempt at baptism, so that his self-immersion is clearly linked to sexual guilt.) Throughout his trial
Turner is too preoccupied with his isolation from God to pay much attention to his own defense, and at the end of the novel God returns to him only when he repents of Margaret's murder.

That Turner was half-hearted in his attempts to kill is an implication Styron saw in Gray's document. He has written,

> Throughout the original confession he states over and over that, for accidental reasons of one sort or another he couldn't kill. Will had to do it. But it doesn't hold water that "the sword was dull," as he often says: I'm convinced that he was suddenly overtaken by his own humanity. It is partially why the revolt fails. 30

Though more than one interpretation of these words is possible, Styron's extrapolation from them hardly outrages one's sense of plausibility, despite the opinions of some essayists in the anthology *Ten Black Writers Respond*. 31

More troublesome is Styron's emphasis upon Turner's sexual frustration and obsessiveness. Of Margaret, Styron says,

> The Whiteheads, it is clear from Drewry's book, lived very close to the farm where Nat was a slave. They were among the more prosperous and better educated people in that region. All these things began to take on a certain architecture in my mind and it occurred to me that since Nat had killed no one else, and he killed this girl who was a beautiful girl and who was considered one of the belles of the county, then the
psychological truth behind the matter is that Nat did not hate her: he loved her, or at least had a passion for her... 32

Styron also believes that Turner's impulses were "those of the traditional revolutionary--that is to say puritanical, repressive, and sublimated... Turner lived a sexual life of fantasy, fantasies of women, mainly white women, which in turn led to imagined revelations... from the Divine Spirit."33

We know from contemporary sources that Turner had a slave wife, who was owned by another master, and this fact does not appear in the novel. Some of the black critics used this fact to argue that Turner could not have been obsessed with Margaret Whitehead or any other white woman.34 But one could as well argue that married slave-owners could have no sexual interest in slave women--something we know to be far from true.35 Given these critics' view of Turner's personality as "virile and commanding,"36 it is not at all impossible that he could have been attracted sexually to Margaret, and this attraction, combined with his visions of power over whites, might have become an obsession.

However, Turner's marriage does point to a man more complex than Styron's creation, one whose loyalties were even more agonizingly divided than the novel suggests. The earlier parts of the book do show that Turner's
resentment is fed by many events. He is frustrated in his attempt to become a freedman, and comes to hate the master who he feels has betrayed him. His own unwitting betrayal of his friend Willis is engineered by whites. The condescending remarks of Mrs. Whitehead, Margaret's mother, are a humiliating reminder that he is a chattel. These things, reinforced by his isolation and his sense of religious mission, contribute greatly to the explosive consequences of his thought. But his preoccupation with Margaret so dominates the latter part of the novel that the other themes all but disappear, and his introspective moments invite glib psychoanalytic interpretation. (They also contain some of the book's weakest prose--the last few pages are embarrassingly overwrought.)

This emphasis undermines the power of the book's religious theme, especially. Styron has said,

One must remember that [Turner] is a religious fanatic. And the book . . . is a sort of religious parable and a story of exculpation. . . . It should be apparent that the book expresses the idea of Old Testament savagery and revenge redeemed by New Testament charity and brotherhood.38

But as Stanley Kauffmann has commented,
The opposition of the two theologies is never made; the redemption is never effected. . . . [T]he central defect of the book is that Styron has written a novel about a religious agonist without fulfilling—in any way he might have chosen—the religious agony. There can be no satisfaction in the story of Nat, the God-driven rebel, unless we are convinced that his destruction brings him closer to God—or else plunges him into courageous cosmic loneliness.

The drama of religious mission is abandoned in favor of the psychosexual idea. It would be one thing if the book demonstrated clearly that religious ecstasy and sexual ecstasy are, in Turner's case, identical. But, as Kauffmann concludes, it does not do this: "They are simply both there, the former inconclusive, the latter unenlightening." In this connection, it is regrettable that Styron omits Turner's flight after the failure of his plans. This would have been a splendid opportunity to present the religious agony in its most intense form, with Turner having to reconsider his mission now that his lieutenants have been killed or captured—that is, to choose between flight and martyrdom. We might then see the process that led to his surrender. The decision of the historical Turner not to plead guilty at his trial, and his comments to Gray about Christ's crucifixion, could easily be made consistent with such reflections, and would provide a more convincing and forceful conclusion to the book.
Another implication that is not developed is the dramatic irony of Turner's imitating white men's thought processes even as he plots the overthrow of his masters. He finds a religious justification for killing whites, just as his masters could quote Scripture in defense of oppressing blacks; his association of political and sexual power simply inverts the whites' exploitation of slave women and obsession with the black man's sexuality. Such an irony could have been an effective--and more subtle--demonstration of the psychological consequences of slavery. A similar theme appears in Faulkner's *Light in August*. Although Joe Christmas consciously rejects the extreme moral categories of his stepfather, the Presbyterian fanatic McEachern, his uncertainty about his identity becomes the overwhelming issue of his life because he regards it in similarly exaggerated terms--literally and figuratively, it is a black or white issue. But whereas this confusion becomes an important theme in Faulkner's novel, Styron fails to make such a mental process meaningful in Turner's character.

Melville never attempted so meticulous a reconstruction of the past as is displayed in *Nat Turner* and *Oliver Wiswell*; in his books authenticity of detail is unimportant next to the thematic interest. But he uses techniques that might have been profitably imitated in
Nat Turner. His version of the trial record in "Benito Cereno" magnifies the horror of the events aboard the San Dominick by its dry understatement, and a similar treatment of Turner's trial and sufferings could have been equally effective, since these passages are often guilty of rhetorical inflation.

Both Oliver Wiswell and Nat Turner are ambitious, and if both fall short of the highest quality, they show a good deal about what is workable in historical fiction. Both demonstrate how certain effects can be incompatible with others. The conventional melodramatic structure of Oliver Wiswell is at odds with its inside-out approach to the American Revolution, while Styron's book, trying to be both "historical re-creation" and "meditation on history," suffers from the incompatibility of these intentions. As Joseph Turner has written,

The strategy of the first-person narrative builds into the novel an unresolvable contradiction; for if it is Nat Turner's "Confessions," then it cannot be Styron's "meditation," and vice versa. The difficulty, therefore, goes beyond the inevitable problem of convincing the reader that Nat Turner is speaking, to a deeper irony: that to succeed, Styron must efface himself completely, forfeit any attempts at "meditation."41

The occasional grandiloquence of the style is probably due partly to this confusion of intention, and some sections
of the book, such as the dialogue of Turner and Gray about revolution, seem more apt for a meditation than the dramatic situation— one is particularly aware of Styron's irony when he has Gray say, "'It just ain't a race made for revolution, that's all. That's another reason that nigger slavery's goin' to last for a thousand years.' "42 The psychosexual theme I have criticized may also have received its unfortunate emphasis because of Styron's interest in theories of the "revolutionary ascetic," which he discusses in one of his interviews.43 That is, the tendency toward generalization that marks the meditation has here interfered with the full development of the fictional character.

But the book has many remarkably effective moments, as well. Styron is successful in creating a range of slave types, from the servile Hubbard to the crazed, bloodthirsty Will. (Hubbard may represent Styron's more felicitous assimilation of a historical theory, in this case Stanley Elkins' portrait of the "Sambo" personality in his ground-breaking study, Slavery.) He has also done an impressive job of showing how the accidental and irrational disrupt or shape events, as in Turner's inability to kill after his plans for annihilation. As Martin Duberman has written,
Styron knows, as do few historians, that life is more like a happening than a planned performance, that even when an actor chooses his own part, he can discover on opening night that he is miscast in his role or has forgotten his cue.

Such insights into the character of rebellion, and the powerful re-creation of the life of its period, account for the superiority of Nat Turner to Oliver Wiswell, though in generic terms the latter may be more coherent. Oliver Wiswell's inversion of our usual sympathies does not result in a more penetrating analysis of the American revolution. If Styron's book succeeds in fits and starts, Roberts' achieves its consistency at the price of superficiality.

In principle, authors of historical fiction should be able to deal with political issues, like black rebellion, that are still vital. As Benedetto Croce pointed out, all history is contemporary history, and it is natural that novelists, as well as historians, should seek parallels to the present. A few contemporary British writers have chosen such issues. J. G. Farrell, in The Siege of Krishnapur, treats Victorian imperialism in ways that mirror modern Western misadventures in the East; David Caute has written naturalistic historical novels about the exploitation of Africa. But modern American authors, especially, have been less interested in political issues.
than in literary conventions or our assumptions about historical "truth"; John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon, for instance, belong in this category. Two books by E. L. Doctorow, however, synthesize these approaches by dealing with political issues while challenging the reader's expectations about characterization and structure, and one of them, *Ragtime*, features a revolutionary black character who may be compared to Styron's Turner. But before I focus on these books in my final chapter, I wish to show how they and other "post-modern" works became possible because of *Absalom, Absalom!*. So to Faulkner's novel I shall turn first.
CHAPTER IV NOTES


5Ibid. The two quotations in this paragraph are from pages 261 and 264 respectively.

6Ibid., p. 264.


8Ibid., p. 547-8.

9It is interesting that Buell is the only Loyalist whom we see do anything legally or morally dubious. When Oliver and his family are victimized by an unscrupulous warehouse owner in Boston, Buell happens by the owner's property when it has been wrecked by rebels, and makes off with some provisions. Later he kills a man involved in the unjust execution of Soame Leighton. In both cases he is presented as justified in his action, and he seems a Robin Hood figure, meting out justice to villains beyond the reach of the law. He is clearly differentiated from the other Loyalist characters by his quaint speech: "Now you take these Boston mobs: they ain't tied down by rules and regulations. . . . They don't have to wait for an official war or a regular battle if they want to kill somebody. They just go and shoot him any time they feel like it; and then some important feller like Sam Adams, who got 'em started shooting in the first place, says
Oh my! Oh my! He ain't sure they should 'a' done it! Right in spite of his regret the feller that was shot stays shot, which was what was intended of him to do." (p. 73)

Oliver approves of both actions, though he finds out about them only after the fact; no doubt Roberts thinks it important that vengeance be left to a clearly humorous character like Buell in whom the absence of high-mindedness is not so disturbing.

10Roberts, p. 59.
11Gissen, p. 905.
12Roberts, p. 836.
13Cawelti, p. 265.
17The quotations in this paragraph are from Gray's document, reprinted as "The Original Confessions" in The Confessions of Nat Turner: A Critical Handbook, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Irvin Malin (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1970). The words of the Spirit may be found on pages 6 and 7 respectively; the exchange between Gray and Turner, on page 8; and the "gratify our thirst" speech on page 12.
18Ibid., p. 11.
19Ibid., Both quotations are on p. 14.
21Quoted in Tragle, p. 136. Styron's essay "This Quiet Dust," which describes his research for Nat Turner, is reprinted in Friedman and Malin, pp. 18-35.

23Styron, "Author's Note," p. ix.


25Quoted in Plimpton interview, p. 37.

26Styron, Nat Turner, p. 122.


29Rahv, p. 8.

30Styron, quoted in Plimpton, p. 40.

31See Lerone Bennett, Jr., in Clarke, pp. 13-4. Bennett contends that Turner, as the general, delegated the duty to kill. But the historical Turner mentions several times in Gray's document that he made attempts to murder other whites.

32R. W. B. Lewis and C. Vann Woodward, "Slavery in the First Person: Interview with William Styron," in Friedman and Malin, p. 55. From Drewry's book one learns only about as much as from Gray's document about the Whiteheads. The source of Styron's information about the family's status and Margaret's beauty I have been unable to discover.

33Styron, quoted in Plimpton, p. 38.


This passage appears on pp. 327-8 of *Nat Turner*:

"She cast her eyes back at me and said: 'Do you know, I've offered Mr. Tom Moore a thousand dollars for you? One thousand dollars.'

"Strange that, after a fashion, the woman's manner toward me had been ingratiating, even queerly tender . . . in a roundabout way downright maternal. . . . Yet she had never once removed herself from the realm of ledgers, accounts, tallies, receipts, balance sheets, purse strings, profits, pelf--as if the being to whom she was talking and around whom she had spun such a cocoon of fantasy had not been a creature with lips and fingernails and eyebrows and tonsils but some miraculous wheelbarrow."

Quoted in Plimpton, pp. 41-2.


Ibid., p. 678.


He says in the Plimpton interview, p. 38, "His impulses were, historically speaking, those of the traditional revolutionary--that is to say puritanical, repressive, and sublimated. Such impulses seem an authentic part of the revolutionary drive: Luther, Castro, Danton, Mao--all of them are basically puritanical."

Duberman, p. 213.
The milestone in the development of post-war American historical fiction is William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* Mark A. Weinstein has called it "the first great historical novel to dramatize the modern vision of history";¹ Harry B. Henderson has said that in it "Faulkner investigated the nature of historical narrative with an intensity unmatched by any other American work."² Its characters, its techniques, and its implications demonstrate clearly how the genre has broken away from the model established in the nineteenth century.

Thomas Sutpen differs markedly from the protagonists of Scott and Cooper. He is paradoxical in his combination of innocence and ruthlessness, and, as Henderson says, he embodies another contradiction as a "self-made man," since that idea "denotes a man created by his own exertions but another's model"—in this case, that of the planter aristocracy.³ This rise distinguishes him from Scott's and Cooper's middle-of-the-road heroes, who are gentlemen by birth and who triumph eventually by gaining social or psychological security; that is, they discover
their identities. Sutpen never finds his identity, and his design fails. Not only is society suspicious of his origins, but his enterprise unwittingly caricatures the methods of the original planters. The speed and brutality with which he constructs his estate simply exaggerate the "moral brigandage" of the early settlers. To this extent he is also unlike Cooper's renegade-hero Leatherstocking, who lives in harmony with Nature rather than imposing his will upon it, and whose fate is not primarily his own making.

Sutpen is "representative" in the sense of ancient epic rather than of Scott. He is neither benign nor mediocre, but larger than life, a figure who embodies the tragedy of the South. As David Levin has commented, the issue is not

whether most planters were as ruthless as Sutpen, but whether the system required of any white man who wanted to find a dignified place in it the outrageous waste of land, humanity, and labor. . . . [He is] not the greedy man, but the man seeking status in an acquisitive society that has refused to see that he has any intrinsic worth.4

His model is provided by a corrupt society based upon the denial of brotherhood, and the condign punishment for that society is fratricidal conflict, the Civil War.
Sutpen's megalomania does ally him with such Melville characters as John Paul Jones in *Israel Potter*, and Faulkner's presentation of the circularity of evil links *Absalom* to "Benito Cereno" as well. In *Absalom*, as in "Benito," the tactics of dehumanization are passed from oppressor to oppressed, so that when the latter rebel, violence and injustice are perpetuated. Here Sutpen's fortunes are destroyed by the war, and Sutpen himself is killed by Wash Jones, whom he has humiliated as he had been at the planter's door in childhood.

In his fascination with the "mythicizing" of history, too, Faulkner resembles the Melville of *Israel Potter*, "Billy Budd," and the Civil War poems. As I have shown in Chapter II, Melville is preoccupied with the reality of events and how posterity regards them. In *Israel* he speculates on John Paul Jones' actions and what historians will make of them; this develops into more general reflection on how men impose their self-conceptions on the national memory. The Civil War poems suggest that the political issues which gave rise to the conflict will be forgotten, and future generations remember only moral stances. "Billy Budd" is concerned with myth in two ways: its characters are explicitly associated with Christian myth, and Billy is apotheosized by the sailors after his death.
In *Absalom*, though, Faulkner is looking through the other end of the telescope. If Melville consistently describes events as they happen and then shows (or wonders) what will be made of them, Faulkner begins with memory and legend and allows his characters to speculate in the other direction—what really happened and why. His technique also differs from Melville's. The narrative structure of *Absalom* is non-linear (the characters often return to an inadequate explanation, adding facts or inferences) and the single omniscient narrator is replaced by a series of narrators, each of whom possesses some facts but is obliged to connect them with guesswork.

Harry Henderson and Mark Weinstein have called attention to the parallels between *Absalom* and R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, one of the most important works in modern historiography. (It is unlikely that Faulkner could have known of Collingwood's ideas, since *The Idea of History* was published from the author's unfinished manuscript in 1946, ten years after *Absalom.* ) Weinstein is interested in Collingwood's attack upon the nineteenth-century faith in facts, a faith given its most famous expression by the great German historian, Leopold von Ranke—a scholar whose interest in history was stimulated by his reading of Scott. Collingwood
argues that the processes of history "are not processes of mere events but processes of actions, which have an inner side, consisting of processes of thought; and what the historian is looking for is these processes of thought. All history is the history of thought." The historian's only method in discerning these thoughts is to re-think them; to understand Caesar, he must become Caesar. This position represents a shift from the role of facts in history to the activity of the historian. "The historian is his own authority and his thought autonomous, self-authorizing," and the creative imagination is what given him this authority: "The web of imaginative construction is something far more solid and powerful than we have hitherto realized. So far from relying for its validity upon the support of given facts, it actually serves as the touchstone by which we decide whether alleged facts are genuine." As a result, the historian prefers the account of the past which he can incorporate into a consistent vision of his own. The logical danger of this position, as Weinstein suggests, is that "such extreme subjectivity can lead to total skepticism about historical events." But although subsequent historians have tried to qualify this idea of the historical method, Collingwood's view remains essentially unrefuted.

Similarly, in Absalom we are constantly reminded--by stylistic clues, by interruptions of the story, or by
conflicting interpretations—that the "facts" about the Sutpens are always filtered through narrators with different interests and different kinds of involvement. Mr. Compson's detachment and Latinate style, Rosa Coldfield's Biblical imagery and emphasis upon Sutpen as "demon," Quentin and Shreve's fascination with the motives of Henry and Bon, are among the ways Faulkner reminds us we are not reading "objective" accounts.

Harry Henderson emphasizes Collingwood's analogy between the historian and the detective in a murder case. Though Collingwood apologizes for using an example from a literary genre "beneath the dignity" of the reader, he develops a parallel between the Scotland Yard inspector's investigation and the historian's examination of his evidence. Henderson adapts this analogy to compare Absalom with the American hard-boiled detective story, in which, he argues, the interest of the narrative gradually shifts from the motive for the crime to the motives of the investigator. For example, in Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon,

the murder of Sam Spade's partner is a natural outgrowth of machinations to which the partner was merely incidental. In his attempts to uncover the killer Spade seeks a delicate balance of involvement and professional detachment. The significant action of the novel is not the murder at all, but rather, Spade's choice of the woman he loves as the one who must "take the fall" for the crime.
Quentin in *Absalom* speculates about the Henry-Bon-Judith relationship in ways that reflect his own obsessions, and the novel as a whole returns to certain events again and again, expanding them or offering causes for them, just as the detective story returns repeatedly to the crime and shows its characters trying to make the facts into a consistent pattern.

Of course, the detective analogy breaks down in an important respect. The investigator's explanation at the end of a detective story is authoritative: the facts have finally been shown in the proper relationship. In *Absalom*, most critics have concluded, the reconstruction by Quentin and Shreve, although it includes more facts than the previous ones, is not to be considered final, but only another statement of possibilities. Furthermore, *Absalom* concludes not with a sense of rationality and resolution, but with Quentin's almost hysterical intensity: "I dont hate [the South]! I dont hate it!" The burden of the past, and the relations of blacks and whites, are still unresolved.

In subsequent American historical fiction, discontinuous narration, the self-consciousness and subjectivity of narrators, and the sense of historical truth as imaginative construct rather than sequence of facts, have been common, even if the direct influence of *Absalom* is often slight.
Faulkner demonstrated that fiction about history could be as sophisticated as any other, and his book questions the very processes by which history is understood. We can see the working-out of these techniques and ideas in such contemporary works as Thomas Pynchon's *V.*, John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and George Garrett's *The Death of the Fox.*

Among very recent writers, E. L. Doctorow has shown a continuing interest in the relation of history and fiction, since two of his novels and a theoretical essay concern this subject. All of Doctorow's novels attest to his interest in the "formulaic" sub-genres of fiction. His first book, *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), is a Western, his second, *Big as Life* (1966), a science-fiction satire about the imminent destruction of New York City. With *The Book of Daniel* (1970), he gravitated to historical fiction, and *Ragtime* (1974), though quite different in its approach to the past, also belongs in this category.

The narrator of *The Book of Daniel* first identifies himself as Daniel Lewin, and the self-consciousness of his narration is immediately evident: Daniel tells the reader where he is writing and what kind of paper and pen he is using. The story begins with Daniel and his wife on their way to a mental hospital where Daniel's sister Susan has been admitted after a suicide attempt. A few pages later
he interrupts the narrative with little essays on the Old Testament God and on the Russian revolutionary Bukharin; soon after giving a list of "subjects to be taken up" (these concern his family), he describes a childhood experience. He and Susan are being led through a crowd by a man named Ascher. Their presence causes a sensation in the crowd; holding up placards, people begin to chant, "Free them, free them." Here Daniel addresses the reader:

Oh, baby, you know it now. We done played enough games for you, ain't we. You a smart lil fucker. You know where it's at now, don' you big daddy. You got the picture. This the story of a fucking, right? You pullin' out yo lit-er-ary map, mutha? You know where we goin', right muthafuck?  

The reader learns that Daniel's original surname was Isaacson, and that his parents were executed as atomic spies in the early fifties. The rest of the book explores Daniel's and Susan's relationships to their real parents and their step-parents, Daniel's treatment of his own wife and child, and his views of other people connected with the case. (Late in the book he confronts Linda Mindish, daughter of the Isaacsons' accuser.) This narrative is interwoven with Daniel's reflections on the Cold War, the Bible, the state's use of corporal punishment for class subjugation, the New Left, and many other subjects.
Because of its major action (Daniel's attempts to deal with the Isaacsons' trial and execution), the novel is clearly an example of "disguised historical fiction," as Joseph Turner designates it; we are intended to identify Paul and Rochelle Isaacson with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. To this extent it resembles Warren's All the King's Men, whose Willie Stark corresponds in many respects to Huey Long. But, Turner argues, Daniel is playing a more elaborate game with the reader than is Warren's novel:

At the same time as the disguise preserves the autonomy of the novel, Doctorow tries to generate the kinds of historical expectations that are created when a novelist deals directly with recorded history. Rather than invented historical fiction, which is what Warren's novel resembles, Doctorow's novel keeps moving in the direction of documented historical fiction, as evidenced by the way Doctorow manipulates his narrator.

The narrator treats his parents as real historical individuals, and in the passage where Daniel addresses the reader, we are expected to make the connection between the Isaacsons and the Rosenbergs. By making this connection, the reader "must interpret the novel on two levels: for if he is to occupy the same position as the audience that Daniel addresses, he must continually translate, even as he willingly accepts, the fictional disguise that stands between him and the history that Daniel purports
to be recounting." That is, unlike All the King's Men, The Book of Daniel cannot be understood without taking into account the historical source for its events.

However, the book is not primarily concerned with the obvious political issues--the evidence for or against the guilt of the Isaacsons and the ways that left- and right-wing factions exploit the case. Instead, it focuses on the legacy of the Isaacsons as it affects their children; one might say that the main action of the book is the struggle of Daniel and Susan to free themselves of their "mythic" status as the victims of Cold War hysteria.

"'You poor kids,' all the comrades used to say. They [Daniel and Susan] were like figures in a myth who suffer the same fate no matter what version is told; who remain in eternal relationship no matter how their names are spelled" (p. 63).

Susan's suicide attempt is directly linked to the irreconcilable roles she enacts: child of the Isaacsons and New Left radical. She has argued with her brother about using money from their trust fund to set up an Isaacson Foundation for leftist causes; angered by what she takes to be his selfishness and cynicism, she writes a letter accusing him of believing in their parents' guilt and telling him that henceforth he ceases to exist for her. But her political mentor, Artie Sternlicht, is
contemptuous of the Isaacsons' tactics. He tells Daniel,

"Your folks didn't know shit. The way they handled themselves at their trial was pathetic. I mean they played it by their rules. The government's rules. You know what I mean? Instead of standing up and saying fuck you, do what you want, I can't get an honest trial anyway with you fuckers--they made motions, they pleaded innocent, they spoke only when spoken to, they played the game. All right? The whole frame of reference brought them down because they acted like defendants at a trial" (p. 151).

On Sternlicht's wall is a collage of pictures, movie stills, and other objects, which he calls "EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME" (p. 136). It is on her way to Sternlicht's with a poster of the Isaacsons that Susan stops at a restaurant and slashes her wrists. When Daniel goes to see her at the mental institution, she says only, "They're still fucking us. Goodbye, Daniel. You get the picture" (p. 9). After his conversation with Sternlicht, Daniel concludes, "She didn't mean Paul and Rochelle [Isaacson]. That's what I would have meant. What she meant was first everyone else and now the Left. The Isaacsons are nothing to the New Left. And if they can't make it with them who else is there?" (p. 153). Susan retreats further and further into herself, and eventually appears to will her own death.

As his comment implies, Daniel is a much more elusive, if no less tormented, character. Whereas Susan's
aggression is mostly internalized, Daniel is often capable of cruelty to his wife and child. Although he participates in a New Left march on the Pentagon, he tries to stop Susan from donating her money to the cause, and he is conscious of political powerlessness:

No matter what political or symbolic act I perform in protest or disobedience, no harm will befall me. I have worked this out. It's true. I am totally deprived of the right to be dangerous. If I were to assassinate the President, the criminality of my family, its genetic criminality, would be be established. . . . And probably whatever cause I lent myself to could be more easily discredited (p. 72).

Ironic and skeptical, he repeatedly criticizes Susan's innocence and wholeheartedness: "In Susan resides the fateful family gift for having definite feelings. Always taking stands, even as a kid. A moralist, a judge. . . . And all wrong. Always wrong" (p. 9). But at times, as in his confrontation with Linda Mindish, he seems to envy Susan this innocence, too; she has not been corrupted in the same way as he, willing as he is to be a "flawless forged criminal of perception" (p. 275). He is continually aware of role-playing, including his own. His and Susan's behavior, he notes sarcastically, was quite at odds with their public image as innocent victims, and he mentions with amusement the Isaacsons' sense of themselves. When Paul Isaacson is beaten up after a Paul Robeson concert
and Rochelle tends to him, "They didn't seem to notice me. I understood the universe stood in proper relation at last to the family ego" (p. 110). Yet he also believes that he and Susan constitute an aristocracy of suffering, and that the bond between them makes his own wife and child irrelevant, "not in the same class" (p. 9).

The book's discontinuous narration is intended partly to reflect the restless, impulsive play of Daniel's consciousness. The impulsiveness, however, also represents a philosophical stance. In a memorable passage late in the book he rejects the idea of sequence:

What is most monstrous is sequence. When we are there why do we withdraw only to return? Is there nothing good enough to transfix us? . . . If the flower is beautiful why does my baby son not look at it forever? Paul plucks the flower and runs on, the flower dangling from his shoelace. Paul begins to hold, holds, ends hold of the flower against the sky, against his eye to the sky. I engorge with my mushroom head the mouth of the womb of Paul's mother. When we come why do we not come forever? The monstrous reader who goes on from one word to the next. The monstrous writer who places one word after another. The monstrous musician. (pp. 245-6)

The rejection means first of all that he chooses to impose his own pattern upon the events he is describing, allowing them to gather power by their association in his context rather than in strict cause-effect order. The control which is denied him in his life is possible
over the artifact—the controlling intelligence is overt, capable of stopping the deterministic succession of events. He can choose to give no more to the "monstrous reader," or to digress about the history of the Cold War, or to imagine his parents' thoughts at the trial. In his addresses to the reader, in his insistence upon his role and his interest in reconstructing the past—continually trying to fit it into an imaginative framework—he is performing as a historian in Collingwood's sense.

The rejection of sequence has, of course, a psychological element, as well. The book's aggressive individuality and discontinuity imply a rejection of the Isaacsons, who stand for martyrdom, logical analysis, principled behavior. Daniel, like Artie Sternlicht, tends to think in terms of images rather than Marxist ideology and to act in impulsive, perverse ways (as when he frightens his wife by tossing their son Paul too high). He has chosen to be an oppressor rather than a victim, in a pattern familiar to us from Melville, Styron, and Faulkner.

Barbara Estrin has written of the sequence passage, "The need to confess, to get the matter out, appears as the inspiration for the book. But the exposure of the symptom cannot cure the disease, so that as the story proceeds, its teller seeks another alternative: a conclusion." She points out that Daniel's words emphasize
the preferability of quick death to prolonged life, and she suggests that Daniel Isaacson (as distinct from Daniel Lewin) wishes "to return to a state of innocence prior to the 'matter' of his book." But the return to innocence is impossible, and Daniel, unlike his sister, is incapable of suicide. His book has three endings: a view of the house where the Isaacsons were arrested, the funerals of his parents and of Susan (these are superimposed, in one of the book's most effective uses of simultaneity), and Daniel's being ordered out of the Columbia library, where he is writing his book, by student radicals who are closing it down. The book ends, then, on an ambiguous note: the superimposition of funerals implies the continuity, or even the identity, of past and present, whereas the disruptiveness of the New Left radicals contrasts with the passivity of the Isaacsons. But Daniel, true to family tradition, does not resist: "I have to smile. It has not been unexpected. I will walk out to the Sundial and see what's going down" (p. 302). He closes with a mock-preface to his book as a "dissertation," and with a quotation from the book of Daniel:

and there shall be a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation . . . .
and at that time the people shall be delivered, everyone that shall be found written in the book. . . . Go thy way Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end (pp. 302-3).
The Old-Testament allusion of this passage and the book's title are among the echoes of Absalom. The Biblical Daniel has been introduced quite early in the narrative; unlike Absalom, though, Daniel often explicitly uses the Bible for parallels within the text itself. In the modern Daniel's book, as in the Bible, the Jews are a persecuted minority in an alien land. The Biblical Daniel's brothers are accused of sacrilege, and thrown into the fiery furnace; Daniel Isaacson's parents are condemned to death in the electric chair. (Elsewhere in his narrative Daniel discusses electricity as a metaphor for fire, and the book is pervaded, as Barbara Estrin has shown, by images of heat and chill, particularly at moments of crisis.) The ancient Daniel interprets events, but is himself plagued by apocalyptic visions which he cannot explain; likewise, our narrator attempts to explain history, and is similarly tormented by images of tumult and destruction. Finally, both write down their experiences in the hope of freeing themselves from their visions. The Biblical Daniel, however, writes of his vision, "My cogitations much troubled me, and my countenance changed in me; but I kept the matter in my heart" (p. 12). Doctorow's narrator parodies this a few pages later: "But I, Daniel, was grieved, and the visions of my head troubled me and I do not want to keep the matter in my heart" (p. 17).
In his obsession with the past, and in his fixation upon the image of himself and his sister as children, Daniel recalls Quentin Compson. He says to Susan, "All I can say about your voice is that it is so familiar to me that I cannot perceive the world except with your voice framing the edges of my vision" (pp. 208-9). But whereas Quentin's feelings for Caddy are incestuous, Daniel sees his obsession with Susan as quite the opposite:

My involvement with Susan has to do with rage, which is easily confused with unnatural passion. . . . It enrages me that anyone, let alone my kid sister, could have characterized my actions, could have found in what I was doing and the way I was acting enough consistency, enough of a pattern, to make a confident moral judgment (p. 208).

He tapes above her hospital bed a blown-up picture of himself "looking scruffy and militant" (p. 211)—an ambiguous gesture of mockery and attachment, reaffirming the bonds which Susan, in her suicide attempt, has tried to escape.

The discontinuity of the narration is also what reminds the reader of Absalom. The continual flashbacks in Daniel, like those in Faulkner's book, elaborate a few images and themes (the furnace, betrayal) and provide more information for understanding the Isaacsons, although their actual innocence or guilt is never established.
Daniel writes, "My mother and father . . . went to their deaths for crimes they did not commit [sic]. Or maybe they did commit them. Or maybe my mother and father got away with false passports for crimes they didn't commit. . . . Of one thing we are sure. Everything is elusive" (p. 42). Later he writes, "I find no clues either to their guilt or innocence. Perhaps they are neither guilty nor innocent" (p. 130). But Doctorow's method is not identical to Faulkner's. Instead of seeing several characters try to find truth about the past, we have one narrator who willfully alters sequence to make it fit his perceptions.

Furthermore, though the facts of the Isaacson case are ambiguous, the little essays on history which Daniel intersperses in his narrative do not argue that one can understand nothing about the past. Instead, they strongly suggest the impossibility of radical aims, and here Doctorow's method parallels Melville's rather than Faulkner's. Bukharin, for all his courage in standing up to Stalin, had little effect in preserving the goals of the Russian revolution: "What good did it do him except that he became a hero in a novel and an image of sorrowful nobility to Sovietologists?" (p. 53). Daniel cites Bukharin's death as proof that "no revolution is betrayed only fulfilled" (p. 54); he argues that the radical is
destroyed by society as a result of his analysis of it; he points out that Jesus's teachings have been perverted by the institutions which bear his name. The context in which these interludes appear, of course, reminds us of the reason for Daniel's interest in the question. We are never allowed to forget their role in his autobiography, since they are often ironically titled ("True History of the Cold War: a Raga"—p. 232) or interrupted by reflections on his childhood. It is possible to see these essays as Susan does: they are rationalizations for Daniel's reluctance to work for any political change. But they may also be considered Daniel's effort to do something similar to that of the narrator in "Billy Budd"—that is, to come to terms with one's confusion, anger, or grief by placing it in a larger (even mythic) perspective. Melville's Civil War poems, too, suggest that people are remembered for mythic roles rather than for the complexity of their deeds and motives.

Like so many other contemporary fictions, The Book of Daniel plays with generic conventions and uses self-conscious narrative tactics in doing so. As a historical fiction, it is unique among the works I have chosen in that the events it alludes to are within the author's lifetime. But the historical event is central to its theme, and the past in which the Isaacsons are executed is
very deliberately contrasted with the "present" in which Daniel writes, so that one gets almost the sense of different but related societies, as in the classical historical novel--the rate of change has simply accelerated.

The ambiguity noted by Joseph Turner, the book's claiming for its characters both the disguise of fiction and the resonance of fact, is probably intended to reflect the difficulty, for Daniel as well as for us, of knowing where the reconstruction of fact ends and the free play of the imagination begins. Or perhaps this is too conservative a description of the novel's technique. Instead, it seeks to persuade us that, in Collingwood's sense, the only history is contemporary history and the facts have no meaning except within the imaginative scheme. Daniel's complicated consciousness demonstrates both how history affects us and how we can use it as self-justification or manipulation. Speaking of Linda Mindish, he says,

This is what happens to us, to the children of trials; our hearts run to cunning, our minds are sharp as claws... ... There is no way in the world either of us would not be willing to use our sad lives; no betrayal impossible of our pain; no use too cheap of our patrimony (p. 275).

It is a surprise to move from the psychological and narrative complexity of this book to Ragtime, which
Doctorow published four years later. Although it still reflects his interest in left-wing politics, and although its dry, ironic style is at times reminiscent of Daniel's musings, *Ragtime* is quite different in its characterization, its plot structure, and its way of teasing our attitudes toward the past. Instead of "disguised" historical figures, *Ragtime* features completely invented characters (Father and his family, Coalhouse Walker) and famous historical people: Emma Goldman, Houdini, Freud, Henry Ford, Evelyn Nesbit, and J. P. Morgan, among others. Many of the completely invented characters are named according to their roles (Father, Younger Brother). The historical figures, some of whom make only cameo appearances, are treated as if they were entirely fictional, as we shall see. As might be expected from the stark epithets borne by the invented characters and from the size of the "cast" in this relatively short book, the characters—whether "historical" or not—are "flat" rather than "round" in E. M. Forster's sense; even the major characters are defined in terms of a few salient qualities. Thus Houdini is presented as fixated on his mother and impatient with his role as mere entertainer; Coalhouse Walker is defined by his pride, which becomes an obsession; Younger Brother, moody and rebellious, eventually enlists in Walker's campaign of vengeance.
against the men who have damaged his car. This diversity of characters contrasts, of course, with _Daniel_, which returns again and again to a few central characters, constantly seeing them from new angles and in new relationships.

The narrative structures of the books differ as well. While _Daniel_ shifts suddenly back and forth in time, according to the whim of the narrator, _Ragtime_ has a fairly straightforward development: we are introduced gradually to all the characters, and eventually their lives intersect. Once Coalhouse Walker enters, the book follows a traditional pattern of increasing complication and tension as he is humiliated by the men at the firehouse and begins his violent revenge. A very conventional element of suspense about the outcome of his rebellion distinguishes it from _Daniel_, where once we have made the connection of the Isaacsons and the Rosenbergs the outcome is evident. In the earlier work Doctorow de-emphasizes the fate of the Isaacsons in order to focus on how it affects the survivors; in _Ragtime_, the impact of Walker's death is virtually confined to an epilogue.

_Ragtime_'s place in the tradition of historical fiction, or of fiction generally, is controversial. Doctorow feels his method looks back to the "false documents" of Defoe, whose narratives anticipate the novel.
He has said,

From the beginning, novelists have used strategies, have mixed up fact and fiction. That's the region where "Ragtime" is located -- halfway between fiction and history. . . . . Kenneth Rexroth said that "Moll Flanders" is a false document because Defoe wrote in a voice of a prostitute. My book is a false document. A true document would be the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution or the Watergate tapes.13

The Book of Daniel, since it claims to be a first-person narrative by Daniel Lewin, is actually closer to Moll Flanders in this respect, but both of Doctorow's books depend upon an illusion of factuality. Barbara Foley argues that this illusion is intended, paradoxically, to be recognized as such in Defoe's work as well as Doctorow's, but that whereas the skepticism today about the nature of narrative and its power to convey reality proceeds from extreme sophistication, that of the eighteenth-century writers derives from tentativeness about their new enterprise. This view may give too little credit to Defoe for artistic self-consciousness.14 But certainly a difference is that while Defoe is very careful to reinforce the illusion of Moll's authenticity with realistic detail or deliberate awkwardness, Doctorow continually flouts plausibility. He plays with our expectations about the historical characters by putting them in unlikely situations.
Emma Goldman gives Evelyn Nesbit a massage and lectures her on revolutionary politics; Houdini encounters Nesbit's lover, Harry K. Thaw, while escaping from the Tombs; Henry Ford is invited to a private meeting by J. P. Morgan to discuss the secret of the pyramids. In other words, Doctorow feels free, as Foley has pointed out, not only to invent matters not in the public record--this freedom has always been the license of historical novelists--but to tease us with meetings and public events that are deliberately implausible.

To Foley, whose essay also compares *Ragtime* to Dos Passos' *U. S. A.*, this "open challenge to the reader's preconceived notions about what historical 'truth' actually is" is Doctorow's principal divergence not only from the narrative methods of the classical historical novel, but from its epistemological assumptions. Foley shows convincingly how many events and techniques in *Ragtime* parallel those of *U. S. A.* Both works contain ironic commentary on American society in the early twentieth century--a "radical critique of capitalism"--mixed with nostalgia. Doctorow's omniscient narrator often imitates the public stance of Dos Passos' newsreels; *Ragtime* follows *U. S. A.* in its sketches of historical people peripheral to the main narrative. Both books present a microcosm of society, devoting quite a bit of
space to the poor and outcast. More specifically, the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike is mentioned by the Camera Eye in _U.S.A._, and it is important in _Ragtime_ because it involves Tateh, the socialist immigrant who finally marries Mother. In both books characters disappear into the Mexican Revolution (Mac in _U.S.A._ and Younger Brother in _Ragtime_). Foley argues that _U.S.A._ both encompasses and transcends the technique of the classical historical novel by "making historical actuality the focus of literary interest and perceiving in the flow of public events a plot with an inherently moving pattern of rise and fall." That is, instead of history's being wrenched to accommodate fictional development, the reverse is true; Mac "is less a character in his own right than a vehicle for exploring the weaknesses and contradictions of a broader historical phenomenon," and when he has served this purpose he drops out of the narrative. Doctorow is more conventional insofar as history in _Ragtime_ is still subordinated to the development of the characters, but he goes further than Dos Passos in his handling of "facts."

Dos Passos frames his narrative around facts which are ordinarily held to be "true," in the sense that they are externally verifiable; whereas Doctorow treats with equal aplomb facts that are "true" and those that are "created," thus calling into question
our concept of factuality and, indeed, of history itself.

Like Foley, Martin Green believes *Ragtime* is something new in the development of historical fiction, but he connects it with a set of more recent novels: John Berger's *G.*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*.15 These works are written with real command of period detail, take liberties with the facts, vary the time perspective; the point of view is often "provocatively personal, without the persona being identified." He too mentions the teasing relationship with the reader, who must decide about the imaginative status of the characters and events. The new genre assimilates techniques and materials typical of other modern literature—"lurid sexual realism and sudden shifts into fantasy and nightmare."

Both Foley and Green see drawbacks to Doctorow's book. Foley writes,

What I ultimately find distubing about *Ragtime* . . . is its underlying postulate that whatever coherence emerges from the represented historical world is attributable to the writer's power as teller of his story, with the result that the process of historical reconstruction itself, rather than what is being represented, comes to the fore.
She finds U. S. A. "a more inspiring work, insofar as it leaves one with the sense that the problems which Dos Passos confronts reside to a large extent in his materials themselves, and not just in the working of his own historical imagination." In its self-referentiality, though, Ragtime differs little from other contemporary works of fiction—^ and The Sot-Weed Factor, to name only those which also engage in free-wheeling historical recreation. Green says that since all the works he lists challenge the reader "to relate this modernism to the historical period depicted," the writer's necessary qualifications are "taste, tact, and erudition." Ragtime, he feels, exemplifies the erudition, but is deficient in the other respects. It falls into the dangers of the new genre: "whimsicality, nostalgia, and fake radicalism." The whimsicality is typified by the role-names (Father and his family), the disguised reappearance of the socialist radical Tateh as the film-maker Baron Ashkenazy, and the Boy's advice that Houdini warn Archduke Francis Ferdinand of the impending assassination attempt—long before Houdini even knows that he will meet the duke. The nostalgia may be seen in the sumptuous details of clothing, furniture, and setting; even the squalor of the slum scenes is "transformed into a kind of luxury, the luxury of picturesque historical evocation." The falsity of the radicalism is more serious:
The characterization of Coalhouse Walker, the black revolutionary, and Sarah, his martyred wife, is uncritically romantic; while within the white family at the center of the novel the author's sympathies are awarded lavishly to Younger Brother, because he is vaguely rebellious, and most niggardly to Father, because he is a businessman and explorer and head of the family.

This condescending treatment of Father betrays a lack of tact and judgment because Doctorow's attitude seems to be at odds with the dramatized facts about the character. As Green argues, Father is continually undercut because he represents turn-of-the-century male authority (hence racism and jingoism), although he risks his life after Coalhouse Walker takes over the Morgan Library. Conversely, Tateh seems not to forfeit esteem although he apparently abandons his socialist ideals as he becomes a successful capitalist.

A traditional genre that Foley and Green do not consider for Ragtime is the best-selling social melodrama, as defined by John Cawelti. Like Oliver Wiswell, the example I discussed in chapter three, Ragtime uses simplification of character (Coalhouse Walker is dignified and courageous, his opponents venal, bigoted, or cowardly) and relies upon a succession of crises and other extraordinary events to carry the narrative forward. Doctorow's scenes of the textile strike, Emma Goldman's speech, and
the meeting of Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan fit Cawelti's view that "the social setting is often treated rather critically with a good deal of anatomizing of the hidden motives, secret corruption, and human folly underlying certain events or institutions." In a way, the book even fulfills the paradoxical requirement that, despite this portrait of corruption, the principal plot works out "to affirm, after appropriate tribulations and suffering, that God is in his heaven and all's right with the world."  

Coalhouse dies, but he dies heroically, and only after he has forced the authorities to give in by returning the repaired automobile. After Father drowns as a passenger on the *Lusitania*, Mother finds a more compatible marriage partner in Tateh, who is now a success. Though the book's final paragraph includes a few events to show that not all is harmonious (Goldman is deported, Harry Thaw is released), its primary implication is positive: the major characters' fates are commensurate with their virtues. *Ragtime*'s playfulness about historical truth and its ironic style show that it is designed for an audience more sophisticated (and farther left politically) than that of Kenneth Roberts or Irving Wallace, but its "interweaving of the patterns of melodrama with a particular set of . . . social institutions" has a great deal in common with more conventional historical bestsellers.
One is thus disappointed in this book after Daniel not only because the treatment of radicalism is (perhaps deliberately) almost on a comic-strip level, but because subtle and interesting possibilities in the story are sacrificed for garish effects and for the tidy conclusion. One example of abandoned possibilities is Houdini, who is clearly meant to be a representative artist. Having completely mastered his profession, he is impatient with it, tired of being considered a mere entertainer; and he deliberately tests himself with extraordinary physical risks. But the possibilities of his character are hardly developed; one can easily imagine a fascinating account of his career as an exposcer of spiritualists—perhaps with a worthy adversary such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—beyond the page or so which Doctorow gives this subject at Houdini's last appearance in the book. The unexpected meetings of famous people are sometimes witty, and Doctorow's irreverence about them is often refreshing, but the plot's elements of social melodrama finally submerge these virtues. Coalhouse Walker is less complex and interesting figure even than Styron's Nat Turner, which in itself is not necessarily a strike against Doctorow; the two works are different in aims and methods. However, that Doctorow gives Walker the qualities of a black militant of the late sixties, and allows his revenge-plot to
dominate the second half of the book, suggests a kind of aesthetic opportunism, as Green has mentioned. Barbara Foley remarks that Walker and his experiences are "deliberately anachronistic":

Doctorow is commenting on the age of Wilson by importing a dramatic example from the age of Nixon, and his point is . . . that the forms of present-day racism have their roots in the past . . . [He] seems to be implying that accurate representation of the past is less crucial than revelation of the haunting continuity of the past in the present.19

If this is indeed Doctorow's intention, one might reply that the case for "continuity of the past in the present" is undermined by "deliberate anachronism," since it amounts to manufactured evidence. But even if Doctorow intends the work only as a jeu d'esprit, the game becomes manipulative when a central character is designed to appeal to an audience's prejudices rather than subvert them.

In addition to these novels, Doctorow has published an apologetic for them, an essay entitled "False Documents."20 Here he pursues many of the ideas about the conventionality of "fact" which are implicit in his fictions. He shows the parallels between contemporary novelists and historians, who have begun to doubt the validity of their disciplines. As
he notes, E. H. Carr remarked in a famous essay that history is "a continuous interaction between the historian and his facts," and Carr in turn quoted Carl Becker's assertion, "The facts of history do not exist for any historian until he has created them." (Although Doctorow does not mention Collingwood, the Carr essay he cites deals with Collingwood's theory at length.) For Doctorow, history shares with fiction a mode of mediating the world to introduce meaning, and the cultural authority from which they derive allows facts to be perceived. He contends, "History is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory, by which the available data for the composition is [sic] seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes." But the line between genres is further blurred by the packaging, marketing, and even creating of factual materials with the techniques of fiction—news magazines, for example, treat world events as a kind of serial. He concludes, "There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative."

Such thoroughgoing skepticism is difficult to refute theoretically, but it is equally difficult to accept its implications. Is the difference between
fiction and history as narrative so small? Most of us still believe that, as Warner Berthoff has pointed out, anyone can write a new history of an old topic, but one can only write imitations of Tom Jones, since history tells us about events that are otherwise knowable, whereas fiction presents happenings which otherwise cannot be known and which cannot otherwise exist. In short, "history is descriptive, and its problem is verification; fiction is inventive, and its problem is veracity." Fictional narratives may imitate history, but they are known to be a particular writer's invention. It is one thing to say that fiction and history share many formal properties, and another to say that the criteria for judging them are identical.

Doctorow is not alone among novelists in his skepticism about history and his willingness to violate the historical record for artistic effect. His contemporary Robert Coover has also played fast and loose with the Rosenberg case in his most recent and ambitious book, The Public Burning. One "Richard Nixon" is the narrator of about half the chapters, and becomes involved in a number of scrapes; perhaps the most notorious is his visit to Ethel Rosenberg in the death house at Sing Sing, where he succumbs to her advances and gets the words "I AM A SCAMP" printed in lipstick on his bared behind.
Such teasing of conventions about fiction and history is not confined to American writers. Martin Green links *Ragtime* to novels by the Englishmen John Berger, John Fowles, and J. G. Farrell; in *The Situation of the Novel*, Bernard Bergonzi has shown that Berger, Fowles, David Caute, and B. S. Johnson have tried radical revision of the traditional historical novel. These writers do their best to undermine genre by blurring the line between fiction and essay, or by dispensing with narrative coherence. Often their bent is Marxist, and thus they represent a sharp contrast for their fellow Marxist Georg Lukács, whose argument throughout *The Historical Novel* is for realistic fiction. Berger's *G.*, for instance, has been called by Green "brilliantly radical in every sense---politically, sexually, and in literary technique." The book never allows us to forget the implied author, who continually interrupts his narrative to discuss his dreams or the difficulties of writing. (To this extent it resembles Barth's work and those passages in *The Book of Daniel* where Daniel wrestles with his material.) Certainly it challenges the substantiality of genres; as Green has said, "We have to move imaginatively out of the genre novel into the genre history, out of the fictional character into the historical personage, out of dialogue into political essay, and that subterranean movement of our minds is the imaginative experience the book gives us."
At the same time, writers on both continents have found new possibilities in the traditional genre of historical fiction. John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is, as Bergonzi has remarked, "a novel in which the realistic and problematical elements are so cunningly interwoven that it is impossible to keep them in a steady perspective, as in a drawing by M. C. Escher." Fowles re-creates some of the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction (the style of narration and characterization) while enlarging and commenting upon it from the twentieth century's perspective. A similar effort to integrate modern techniques into the traditional genre marks such American books as Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French* (1979), which depicts the French invasion of Ireland in 1798 through an omniscient narrator and a succession of first-person narrators. The different points of view remind the reader how limited is any single account, and the book does cast some doubt upon the validity of historical reasoning; indeed, at times it is reminiscent of Melville in imagining how some event--usually a battle--will be mythologized by future generations.

This study has attempted to demonstrate how varied is the group of works we class together as "historical fiction" and how inaccurate the idea that Scott's is the
only tradition for such works. Of the books discussed at length in my essay, only Oliver Wiswell and Janet Lewis's works show signs of Scott's model, and they are quite far apart in aims and techniques. Oliver retains from Scott the minor aristocrat involved in a great historical upheaval, but the plot, which in the Waverley books provided considerable insight into the diversity of aims among the rebels as well as the hero's psychological evolution, here has dwindled into a melodramatic pattern with a good deal of condescension toward the hero's opponents. Lewis's books do not retain the middle-of-the-road hero, and their resemblance to Scott's novels is that they present people as representative types and take place in times of cultural transition. But their emphasis is upon moral rather than political struggle, and to this extent they are akin to Hawthorne, not just Scott.

Certainly Melville's books represent a tradition very different from Scott's. Melville is interested in the process of historical understanding itself, the transmutation of event into legend and myth, not just the characters and events themselves. Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! also treats these ideas, and perhaps Styron's initial attempt to write a "meditation on history" in
Nat Turner is another example of this impulse. What Nat eventually became, though, was an autobiographical narrative by a famous historical figure. Although, like Scott's work, it deals with the psychology of revolutionaries, it focuses upon an extraordinary, rather than representative, individual, and an omniscient narrator nowhere intrudes to set the character's thoughts in perspective. Nat's story is thus a kind of "false document," though Styron is not as interested as Doctorow in playing with the implications of this method. Doctorow, for his part, looks back to Defoe—yet another tradition. Even so, his books share with those of Melville and Faulkner skepticism about historical knowledge.

Given the remarkable range of examples allowed under his definition of historical fiction, Joseph Turner's task for critics—to establish the conventions of the genre—seems a rather forlorn enterprise. Such fictions may feature real or invented characters, may or may not center upon large political events, may reconstruct a past society in detail or omit such specifics, and may or may not include speculation on how history is known or transmitted. The common denominator of the books discussed here—and hence we come back to the rule of thumb articulated by Scott and essentially preserved by all commentators since—is that they take place in periods before the author's birth, whether a single generation
or many centuries earlier. Yet Turner discusses The Book of Daniel as a "disguised" historical novel, without setting forth his criteria for so categorizing a work set only fifteen years or so before its date of publication. His assumption seems to be that it is historical because at its center is a teasing allusion to an important political event. This is perhaps as far as the definition of "historical fiction" can be stretched: the actual event (the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs) is not reconstructed exactly, but is fictionalized by various changes (names, roles, events) so that history is continually going in and out of focus. The example of Daniel shows that the line between historical fiction and political fiction, like U.S.A. or the "non-fiction novel," as represented by The Armies of the Night, is not easy to draw. For that matter, a book like Coover's The Public Burning moves the carefully documented historical genre toward "speculative fiction" with its invention of events contrary to the public record.

But by one means or another, authors have persisted in creating explicitly fictional treatments of history. The evidence of the recent works cited in this chapter suggests that they are willing to expand, adapt, or undermine (not simply abandon) the ideas they have inherited from their nineteenth-century counterparts. In his
preface to *Peveril of the Peak*, Scott wrote, "But even where the mind of the more careless reader remains satisfied with the light perusal he has offered to a tale of fiction, he will still lay down the book with a degree of knowledge not perhaps of the most accurate kind, but such as he might not otherwise have acquired." It may be that our historical fiction has so changed that we can no longer share the confidence he expressed in its power to awaken a love of historical truth, or even be sure to know that truth. But if writers cannot completely accept his disarmingly simple distinction between fact and fiction, they will always be inspired by the challenge of creating the past anew.
CHAPTER V NOTES

1Mark A. Weinstein, "The Creative Imagination in Fiction and History," Genre, 9 (1976), 270.


3Ibid., p. 257.


5Ranke was apparently led toward scientific historiography by his discovery of the difference in the portraits of Louis XI and Charles the Bold in Scott's Quentin Durward: "I found by comparison that the truth was more interesting and beautiful than the romance. I turned away from it and resolved to avoid all invention and imagination in my works and to stick to facts." This remark is quoted in Weinstein, 264. The discussion of Collingwood's position is taken from Weinstein, 264-7, and Weinstein's argument about its relation to Absalom is 270-2. The quotations from Collingwood may be found in The Idea of History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 215, 236, 245.
This paragraph is indebted to Henderson, pp. 262-5; the quotation is from p. 263.


For the discussion of Biblical parallels in this paragraph I am indebted to Estrin and to John Stark, "Alienation and Analysis in Doctorow's *Book of Daniel*," *Critique*, 16, No. 3 (1975), 101-10. Estrin's comments on the "heat and chill" imagery appear on 581-3 of her essay.


Ralph Rader has argued convincingly that Defoe, far from being confused, was writing a "simulated naive incoherent autobiography" whose artlessness was only apparent.
"[It is] not that Defoe tried and failed to make Moll coherent; he didn't really care if she was or not, only that the reader should interpret her incoherence as that puzzling surface complexity of the real which betokens its underlying unity." "Defoe, Richardson, Joyce, and the Concept of Form in the Novel," Autobiography, Biography, and the Novel (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1973), p. 45.

15 This paragraph summarizes Green's definition of the new genre in "Nostalgia Politics," American Scholar, 45 (1975-6), 841.

16 Foley, 105. For a description of Ragtime as a "novel of context" (i.e., "Coalhouse Walker's story is one of many that illuminate not character but the appearance and feel of an historical moment"), see Barbara Cooper, "The Artist as Historian in the Novels of E. L. Doctorow," Emporia State Research Studies, 29 (Fall, 1980), pp. 36-7. Cooper is more positive about Ragtime than are Foley and Green, since she sees Doctorow as having solved a problem in his earlier works, "the alignment of the subjective and the objective perspectives" through the creation of an anonymous narrative voice which "transcends the limitations of a single human perspective, yet, at the same time, humanizes the subject matter" (p. 39).

17 This paragraph summarizes Green, 842-3.

18 John Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery and Romance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 261. The quotation at the end of the paragraph is from the same page.

19 Foley, 96.


Coover's earlier novel, *The Universal Baseball Association Inc.* J. Henry Waugh, Prop. (New York: Random House, 1968), is very much concerned with history, though it is not, strictly speaking, a historical novel. Henry himself, as well as the baseball players he imagines, is continually preoccupied with the truth behind legend and tradition. In a conversation with his friend Lou, Henry says, "'You can take history or leave it, but if you take it you have to accept certain assumptions or ground rules about what's left in and left out'" (p. 49). By the end of the book, he has abandoned his seasonal summaries of the Association in order to write a history which has an ideological and dramatic shape: "how the league had progressed from individualism and egocentrism . . . to a moral and philosophic concern with the very nature of man and society" (pp. 216-7). His imaginary characters, in the final chapter, carry on a theological controversy about the role of various legendary players in the establishment of the league and its annual initiation rite—history has become myth.


Green, 842.

Bergonzi, p. 225.

For perceptive comments on Flanagan's method in this novel, see the review by Denis Donoghue, "The Stains of Ireland," *New York Review of Books*, 14 June 1979, p. 22.

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