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Universidade de Aveiro Departamento de Línguas e Culturas
2005

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Histórias contadas no feminino em três romances de Jane Urquhart

Universidade de Aveiro Departamento de Comunicação e Arte
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dissertação apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Mestre em Estudos Ingleses, realizada sob a orientação científica da Professora Doutora Maria Aline Salgueiro Seabra Ferreira, Professora Associada do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro

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agradecimentos

Agradeço em primeiro lugar à minha orientadora, Professora Doutora Maria Aline Seabra Ferreira, pelo interesse com que acolheu este projecto, pelo acompanhamento e incentivo dados em todas as fases do meu trabalho, pela cedência de material bibliográfico e pela compreensão e simpatia demonstradas.

Gostaria igualmente de agradecer aos Professores Doutores Anthony Barker e David Callahan, que contribuíram também de forma extraordinária para a minha formação académica, não só através dos seminários do ano curricular deste curso de Mestrado, como também, já anteriormente, das cadeiras sob a sua responsabilidade integradas no curso de Licenciatura em Ensino de Português e Inglês que frequentei nesta Universidade.

Por último (*last but not least*), à minha família, o meu reconhecimento pelo seu constante e inestimável apoio e pela sua permanente confiança em mim.

resumo

Assistiu-se nas últimas décadas do século XX a um assinalável ressurgimento da ficção histórica, um interessante fenómeno que se estendeu a várias literaturas (da anglo-saxónica à latino-americana) e que devolveu a este género literário o prestígio e a relevância de que tinha gozado quando, no século XIX, Walter Scott lhe deu forma. Este interesse da literatura pela história e pelo passado foi acompanhado por intenso trabalho teórico desenvolvido sob a influência do pós-modernismo, pós-colonialismo e do movimento feminista acerca do processo de escrita da história, tendo-se salientado a forma como têm sido tradicionalmente excluídos da historiografia oficial grupos sociais desprovidos de poder e de influência política: as mulheres, as minorias étnicas, as classes trabalhadoras e os povos colonizados.

O presente trabalho irá debruçar-se sobre esta temática, abordando, numa primeira parte, as questões de natureza teórica que problematizam a escrita da história e a sua relação com a literatura e, numa segunda parte, irá analisar três romances históricos da escritora canadiana Jane Urquhart que dão voz a grupos usualmente marginalizados pelas versões oficiais da história: imigrantes, trabalhadores e, sobretudo, mulheres.

abstract

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed a great revival of historical fiction, an interesting phenomenon stretching across literatures as diverse as, for example, the Anglo-Saxon or the Latin-American one, and which restored the prestige and prominence this literary genre had enjoyed when Walter Scott gave it shape in the nineteenth century. Contemporary literature's interest in the past and in history has been paralleled by an intensive theoretical work, carried out under the influence of postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminism, focusing on the writing of history and exposing the exclusion of powerless, marginalised social groups from official historiography: women, ethnic minorities, the working classes and colonised peoples.

This dissertation will deal with these issues, focusing in part I on the theoretical discussions which problematise historical representation and history's relation with literature; in part II it will analyse three historical novels by Canadian author Jane Urquhart which foreground groups traditionally kept out of the historical record: immigrants, workers and, above all, women.

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Introduction

The age of information technology is upon us but, though people the world over are busily trying to catch up with the latest technical developments and gadgets which will supposedly enable them to conquer the future, exploring the past still seems to be as fascinating as ever. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that renders it so mysterious to so many of us. This thesis was precisely derived from a strong interest in the past and in history, on the one hand, and from an intense pleasure in reading and studying literature, on the other hand. Deciding to focus on historical fiction, a hybrid form which straddles the two domains, therefore seemed to be the appropriate choice. Part I of this study will focus on the development of the genre, summarising current theoretical discussions which problematise historical representation and history's relation with literature.

The historical novel's hybrid nature has led some of those who study the genre to describe it as a contradiction in terms, an oxymoronic literary form plagued by conflicting principles and controversy. Indeed, if one takes history to be what really happened and fiction what *did not*, historical novels then become academic aberrations or, at the very least, doomed projects aiming to square the circle and combine the incompatible. But if so, why is it then that over the last two centuries novelists from various literary traditions have disregarded this logical difficulty and produced works which explore the shadowy recesses of the past, winning – in so many cases – such popular acclaim? Well, one of the reasons is that historical fiction can be assessed and analysed from a completely different angle, one which does not see historical accounts and fiction at odds with each other, but rather as complementary types of storytelling, both of them enjoying equal status as forms of narrative. In fact, though historical and fictional storytelling have traditionally confronted each other in modern times as separate forms of discourse, the relation between them was once completely different and no such tension existed, as Lionel Gossman reminds us:

> For a long time the relation of history to literature was not notably problematic. History was a branch of literature. It was not until the meaning of the world [sic] *literature*, or the institution of literature itself, began to change, toward the end of the eighteenth century, that history came to appear as something distinct from literature.[1]

The divorce between historical writing and literature eventually became official with the profissionalisation, or academicisation, of history in the nineteenth century under Ranke's historicism, whose specific method of historical investigation insisted on objectivity as the historians' guiding principle, thereby excluding any possibility of their task overlapping with that of novelists. Ranke himself was an avid reader of historical fiction in his youth – namely Scott's – but, when he tried to find evidence of the fictional world created by the Scottish novelist in the historical sources and documents which recorded and described customs and habits in past ages, Ranke was reportedly very upset by what he perceived to be Scott's flawed representations of the past. Though widely regarded as the greatest and most influential practitioner of the genre, having given it shape and credibility with numerous historical novels, Walter Scott had to face charges of falsehood and historical inaccuracy made by contemporary readers incensed by the way the novelist freely rearranged the information he had gained from research. The relationship between fact and fiction in the historical novels written not only by Scott but also by all his followers was, thus, inevitably surrounded by controversy.

Italian author Alessandro Manzoni centred the first major examination of the historical novel, *Del Romanzo Storico* (*On the Historical Novel*, 1850) on this very dichotomy between fact and invention. Though he himself wrote a historical novel which made him immensely popular and influential in Italy, *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*, 1828), by the time he finished his essay his views on the genre had changed completely for he did not believe historical novels could provide readers with accurate representations of the past, levelling harsh criticism at Scott's novels in the final paragraphs of his study:

> It is undeniable that what first won favor for the historical novel was precisely the illusion of history, and it may be that that illusion will not last long. How many times has it been said, and even written, that the novels of Walter Scott were truer than history! But those are the sort of words that get by in the first blush of enthusiasm and are not repeated upon reflection. For if by history is meant any book that claims that title, the remark amounts to nothing; and if by history is meant all facts and customs that could possibly be known, it is plainly false. [...] A great poet and a great historian may be found in the same man without creating confusion, but not in the same work.[2]

Despite declared dead by Alessandro Manzoni, the historical novel lived on and so did the debate about the relationship between the factual and the fictive within historical fiction. After Manzoni's, one of the other major theoretical works on the genre was *Der historische Roman* (*The Historical Novel*, 1937), written by Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács who, praising Scott for his ability to give "expression to a new, historical attitude on the part of society which arose from life itself,"[3] adopted a wholly different attitude towards factual accuracy in historical novels, stating that

> the novel is much more closely bound to the specifically historical, individual moments of a period, than is drama. But this never means being tied to any particular historical facts. On the contrary, the

> novelist must be at liberty to treat these as he likes, if he is to reproduce the much more complex and ramifying totality with historical faithfulness.[4]

Clearly, the fact that Scott strove for plausibility rather than accuracy by no means lessened the quality of his body of work in the judgement of Lukács who, on the contrary, maintains repeatedly in his study that contemporary historical fiction is not up to Scott's legacy. In fact, when the Hungarian critic published *The Historical Novel*, the genre had been going through a phase of decline which had began around the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the historical background of this literary mode became increasingly flimsier and romance, adventure and exoticism took over as the chief ingredients of the bulk of historical fiction written from then onwards. After the end of the Great War, the demand for such escapist narratives fell significantly and the genre seemed to be exhausted. However, it proved to have far more resilience than some critics and reviewers had predicted, as the interwar years were a period of experiment and renewal carried out by such influential novelists as Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf whose distinctively modern historical novels couldn't be further from the formulaic swashbuckling historical romance. Assessing Woolf's last novel's contribution to the genre, Avrom Fleishman writes:

> *Between the Acts* is not a novel about history but a novel about consciousness-of-history, which includes historiography and historical fiction itself. This incorporation of its own tradition – and the exercise of a widely assimilative formal power – make it the last historical novel of the old school, or the first of the new. It is no longer possible – whether in historiography or in historical fiction – to write convincingly about the past without building the interpretative process into the structure of the work.[5]

Written in 1971, these words were, indeed, prophetic of the future developments in historical fiction. Later in the paragraph Fleishman adds:

> The historical novel of our time will probably join the experimental movement of the modern novel or retire from the province of serious literature. Like history itself, the historical novel must be more than its past, passing freely into new possibilities, or remain a sterile repetition of the forms doled out to it from tradition.[6]

Under postmodernism, self-reflexivity did become a distinctive feature of an important strain of historical fiction described by Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon as historiographic metafiction. This type of narrative is a self-reflexive meditation upon the constitutive devices of story- and history-telling, deliberately blurring the boundaries between literature and historical writing. This rethinking of the relations between fictional narrative and historiography is part of a wider debate that hasn't confined itself to the literary field. On the contrary, over the past thirty years this discussion has also mobilised historians and critics from various backgrounds who have raised relevant questions and problematised the whole notion of the individual's ability to know the past. Much has, thus, been said and written about the hotly debated question *how do we know the past?* David Lowenthal addressed it extensively in his work *The Past is a Foreign Country*:

> Memory, history, and relics continually furbish our awareness of the past. But how can we be sure that they reflect what has happened? The past is gone; its parity with things now seen, recalled, or read about can never be proved. No statement about the past can be confirmed by examining the supposed facts. Because knowing occurs only in the epistemological present, as C. I. Lewis puts it, "*no* theoretically sufficient verification of any past fact can ever be hoped for" [*Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation,* La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1946: p. 200]. We cannot verify it through observation or experiment. Unlike geographically remote places we could visit if we made the effort, the past is beyond reach. Present facts known only indirectly could in principle be verified; past facts by their very nature cannot.
>
> To name or to think of things past seems to imply their existence, but they do not exist; we have only present evidence for past circumstances.[7]

If the past revealed by memory, history and relics is not necessarily *what really happened*, it is, then, in large measure a past of our own creation, shaped by selective recollections, oblivion and invention. Consequently, historical accounts are not reconstructions of the past, but rather cultural constructions moulded by self-interested motives, quite often related to the need of those in power to justify their social status and politic and economic supremacy. They may also be rooted in the common collective need for a shared past, for an identity. Historical accounts therefore serve specific purposes and, to achieve them successfully, they provide past events with an order, a shape and a meaning they lacked when they took place. Lowenthal observes that "historical explanation surpasses any understanding available while events are still occurring. The past we reconstruct is more coherent than the past was when it happened."[8] So, according to this point of view, the historian's task is not significantly different from the novelist's, since they both create a narrative, order events and give them meaning, using similar rhetorical devices and conventions. Over the past decades this idea has been conveyed very consistently by a number of scholars among whom Hayden White is probably the most influential one due to his outstanding contribution to this discussion. There were, however, important precursors in the first half of the twentieth century, like Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood, who also commented on the close affinity between the historian and the novelist. As early as 1946 Collingwood analysed this resemblance in his work *The Idea of History*:

> Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters. Each aims at making his picture a coherent whole, where every character and every situation is so bound up with the rest

> that this character in this situation cannot but act in this way, and we cannot imagine him as acting otherwise. The novel and the history must both of them make sense; nothing is admissible in either except what is necessary, and the judge of this necessity is in both cases the imagination.[9]

Of course this idea that historical truth is a cultural construct relying heavily on the historian's imagination and ability to weave the historical research into a coherent narrative is hotly disputed by the historians and thinkers who are on the other side of the theoretical fence, turning this into a lively debate which has had enormous impact on the development of the discipline over the past few decades. Challenging conservative views on this topic, the contributions of scholars and critics associated with cultural movements like postmodernism, mentioned above, feminism and postcolonialism – which overlap in their desire to expose the partisan nature of historical knowledge – have drawn attention to the fact that official versions of history have silenced many social groups, condemning them to oblivion. Inscribing those marginalised people into our versions of the past has, thus, became the guiding principle of this revisionist approach to history which has, in turn, introduced changes in the concept of history and led to the emergence of new fields of study within the discipline. Focus has, therefore, been put on previously unmapped territories, as those new areas of enquiry foreground precisely the groups traditionally excluded from the making and writing of history – in other words, the victims, or losers, of history: workers, ethnic or racial minorities, colonised peoples and women. Focusing specifically on women's history, Joan W. Scott tells us that the historians of this field have been led, in the course of their research work, to ask pertinent questions concerning the nature of the knowledge produced by standard history, exposing its androcentrism, partiality and incompleteness:

> By what processes have men's actions come to be considered a norm, representative of human history generally, and women's actions either overlooked, subsumed or consigned to a less important, particularized arena? What unstated comparisons are implicit in terms like "history" and "the historian"? Whose perspective establishes men as primary historical actors? What is the effect on established practices of history of looking at events and actions from other subject positions, that of women, for example?[10]

She therefore concludes:

> The radical threat posed by women's history lies exactly in this kind of challenge to established history; women can't just be added on without a fundamental recasting of the terms, standards and assumptions of what has passed for objective, neutral and universal history in the past because that view of history included in its very definition of itself the exclusion of women.[11]

History's broadened scope of analysis was paralleled by a similar development in the literary field, as novelists began to enquire about the lives and experiences of those whose voices had been omitted from the canonical versions of the past. In other words, it is this revisionist mood, this problematisation of the concept of history to which we can trace the current revival of historical fiction. Interweaving the postmodern, feminist and postcolonial discourses, writers across the literary world have, thus, taken on the project of rewriting history and recovering the past of marginalised or misrepresented groups, thereby exposing how narrowly defined official history is when it comes to gender, race and ethnicity, class and culture.

These concerns are very explicitly addressed in contemporary literary traditions as diverse as the Anglo-Saxon or the Latin-American ones. Canadian literature, for instance, actually seems to have gained worldwide visibility and reputation due to this widespread literary phenomenon. Its growing popularity and prestige, both at home and abroad, have indeed benefited substantially from the vitality of Canadian historical fiction, as Herb Wyile observes: "the appearance, almost yearly over the last three decades, of a wealth of historical fiction [...] has helped push Canadian literature to international prominence."[12] In fact, given the general recognition and critical acclaim won by so many Canadian authors over the past decades, it seems hard to believe that there was once a time when Canadian talent seemed to be taken as a contradiction in terms, as Margaret Atwood reminds us:

> The colonial mentality was still in force, meaning that the Great Good Place for the arts was thought to be somewhere else, such as London, Paris, or New York, and if you were a Canadian writer you were assumed by your country folk to be not only inferior, but pitiable, pathetic and pretentious.
>
> (...)
>
> By the time I was twenty [1959] I knew some people who wrote, but not one of them expected to make a living at it. To get even a crumb fallen from the literary movable feast, you'd have to publish outside the country, and that meant you would have to write something that might snare you a foreign publisher. It went without saying that these foreign publishers were not much interested in Canada.[13]

When you have a country as culturally and politically assertive as the U.S.A. for a neighbour, it may prove difficult to come up with the self-confidence needed to overcome the insecurities and inferiority complex Atwood writes about, but Canadians do seem to have developed it and brushed aside the old *Ca nada*[14] stigma. In fact, the conspicuous centrality of history in contemporary Canadian literature can be understood as resulting from a firm commitment to disputing the notion of Canada's lack of historical depth and to showing that the country does have a rich history which can be used as a valuable source of material for writers to develop in their fiction. By excavating the untold and obscure histories of the past, or revisiting established ones, novelists not only challenge and question traditional assumptions about Canadian history and the process of historical representation, but also broaden the nation's history by casting as historical agents groups traditionally allotted very marginal, passive roles. This revisionist historical fiction which turns away from official versions of the past and focuses, instead, on previously neglected or marginalised histories, shatters the traditional view of history as a coherent, homogeneous picture of the past, fully subscribing to the critical analysis which indicates that "history, instead of being a smooth fabric, is more like a quilt, the pieces for which, furthermore, historians have cut and dyed rather than found ready-to-hand,"[15] as Herb Wyile correctly phrases it. Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), a novel which deals with Canadian Native History, is widely credited with having set the trend for Canadian literature's passionate interest in the past and consequent interrogation of traditional conceptions of the writing of history and fiction. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the engagement with Canadian history was also a very important feature of the works produced by writers like Joy Kogawa and Timothy Findley and, as Wyile tells us, this same spirit "has very much been sustained by more recently acclaimed novelists like Wayne Johnston, Jane Urquhart, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Thomas Wharton."[16] And still many other names could be added to the list, given the impressive number of Canadian authors who have written historical fiction shaped by these concerns. Daphne Marlatt, Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood – to mention but three other celebrated examples – have also been influential and successful practitioners of the genre.

Of all the writers mentioned, Jane Urquhart may not be the best-known or the most prolific, but she certainly is extremely committed to this retrieval of marginalised voices from the past. Her fascination with both Canadian and foreign (mostly Western European) landscapes and histories is fully expressed in her work, as clearly illustrated by the novels which are the focus of part II of this thesis. *The Whirlpool* (1986), *Away* (1993) and *The Stone Carvers* (2001) reveal Jane Urquhart as a gifted storyteller who brings the past back to life from a predominantly female point of view and while doing so she exposes, and pushes beyond, the barriers of gender, considerably broadening the practices traditionally associated with the realm of feminine expertise. In a study on the feminine gender ideal underlying Canadian prose works by women writers like Susanna Moodie, Nellie McClung or Sinclair Ross, Misao Dean emphasises that there was nothing unusual about "the performance by women of new actions previously gendered masculine"[17] in the Canadian bush given the hardships faced by settlers as they tried to make a living out of a land which was so unlike the one they had left behind in Europe. Under such circumstances, physical labour, a practice traditionally thought to transgress the feminine ideal, was incorporated into women's sphere. But even bearing in mind the fact that the settlement of Canada by European immigrants required women to engage in activities they were not used to performing in their home countries – especially if they were gentlewomen – it is indisputable that Urquhart's female protagonists come across as transgressors of conventional notions of womanhood in several ways, even by Canadian standards. In fact, all the three novels under analysis include examples of strong female characters who are economically independent, earning a living entirely on their own, rather than helping a husband or some other male relative, which was by far the most common situation in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canadian society. Love of home and adherence to duty as well as to moral and social conventions – central principles underpinning the feminine gender ideal of that period – are also challenged by these protagonists, who are often perceived as misfits and outsiders by those around them whose compliance with the dominant values of the society of their day makes them dismiss these women as strange, slightly eccentric individuals for whom loneliness and seclusion often become the most constant companions.

Jane Urquhart's body of work still hasn't received the critical attention it should be given. There are, however, plenty of reasons why it deserves to be the focus of comprehensive critical analysis, an enterprise to which this study will hopefully make a modest contribution.

Notes

1 Lionel Gossman. *Between History and Literature*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard Univ. Press, 1990: p. 227 (italics in the text).

2 Alessandro Manzoni. *On the Historical Novel*. 1850. Translated and with an introduction by Sandra Bermann. Lincoln and London: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984: p. 126.

3 Georg Lukács. *The Historical Novel*. 1937. Translated from the German by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. London: Merlin Press, 1962: p. 230.

4 *Ibid*. p. 167.

5 Avrom Fleishman. *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1972 (1971), p. 255.

6 *Ibid*.

7 David Lowenthal. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 (1985): p. 187.

8 *Ibid*. p. 235.

9. R. G. Collingwood. *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966 (1946): pp. 245-46.

10 Joan W. Scott. “Women’s History.” *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Ed. Peter Burke. London: Polity Press, 2001 (second edition): p. 52.

11 *Ibid*. p. 58.

12 Herb Wyile. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002: p. 4.

13 Margaret Atwood. *Negotiating with the Dead – A Writer on Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002: pp. 67-8.

14 Eli Mandel writes: “The etymology of the name ’Canada’ is, in one version, Portuguese, ‘Ca nada’ – translating crudely as ‘There is no one here’ or ‘Nothing here at all.’” *The Family Romance*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1986: p. 30.

15 Herb Wyile. *Speculative Fictions*. p. 25.

16 *Ibid*. pp. xii-xiii.

17 Misao Dean. *Practising Femininity: Domestic Realism and the Performance of Gender in Early Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998: p. 13.

I

(HI)STORYTELLING

1. Between the factual and the fictional:
Rise, decline and fall of the traditional historical novel

As L.P. Hartley put it, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there”[1] and it seems that the more distant it is, the more difficult it becomes to resist its allure and the desire (and even the need) to know more about it. The arts’ fascination with mythical or past ages has always been a very prevalent feature, and literature is no exception. In western civilisation, the great literary works of all times provide us with excellent examples: Greek tragedies, as a rule, are set in a remote, mythological era and the epic poems written by Homer and Virgil tell the adventures and travels of equally mythical heroes set against a backdrop of largely historical events, taking place in an ancient past. Medieval European writers looked to bygone eras searching for heroes whose lives and exploits deserved to be sung and praised – for instance, in France *chansons de geste* were typically connected with Charlemagne and Chrétien de Troyes’s courtly romances about King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table were a source of inspiration for other European authors, chiefly Thomas Malory, whose *Le Morte d’Arthur*, printed in 1483, has, in turn, inspired numerous artists throughout the ages. There is no unanimous opinion about the identity of the historical figure on whom the legendary king was based – according to some, he might have been a fifth or sixth-century Romano-British chieftain or general, others claim he was a sixth-century Welsh nobleman who led the Celts into battle against the invading Saxons, and still others hold different theories – but few will deny that nowadays the appeal of Camelot remains as powerful as ever.

In the Renaissance, scholars and artists, determined to put an end to what they saw as a long period of cultural decline and stagnation, undertook a revival of art and literature under the influence of classical models. Although the Renaissance period witnessed major inventions and discoveries, important changes in the social system and a significant growth in commerce, it was this surge of interest in classical antiquity that primarily influenced the art developed during that era. In literature, genres and modes which had been neglected for centuries, such as the tragedy, were then revived and taken up by practitioners, some of whom, thanks to their genius and creativity, became as eminent in the history of western literature as the classical authors who inspired them. Beginning in Italy, where it was firmly established by the end of the fifteenth century, the Renaissance thinking was firstly developed by writers such as Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio, who thus became the leading figures of the early period. However, the new cultural winds were soon blowing across other European countries as well, and their literatures flourished with a wave of great works produced by authors who themselves came to epitomise the Renaissance thinking. The emulation of the classics naturally implied an admiration for the values of Roman-Greek antiquity on which the humanist ideology of the Renaissance movement was based. While breaking up with the recent past, artists and thinkers were looking back to a distant one in search of guidance, inspiration... "rebirth," the movement's name literal meaning.

The history of literature is full of interesting twists, though. The Middle Ages, which had been appraised so negatively by Renaissance scholars and thinkers, underwent a major revaluation during Romanticism, a movement not easily defined due to the seemingly disparate and contradictory ideas and influences that sustained it. On the whole, its cardinal features stem from a belief in the imagination as the highest creative faculty. This primacy of imagination over reason led to a demand for spontaneity and lyricism, qualities romantics found in folk poetry and in medieval romance. This interest in the Middle Ages was, in fact, pointed out by Henry A. Beers, one of the first leading Anglo-Saxon scholars in the study of the Romantic period, as the distinguishing trait of the movement: "Romanticism, then, in the sense in which I shall commonly employ the word, means the reproduction in modern art or literature of the life and thought of the Middle Ages."[2] The term *romantic* is itself revealing of such an interest. As Aidan Day tells us,

> The word "romantic" first appeared in English in the middle of the seventeenth century (the *O[xford] E[nglish] D[ictionary]* gives 1659 as its earliest appearance). It was derived from the word *romaunt,* meaning "romance", which had been borrowed into English from French in the middle of the sixteenth century (the *OED* gives 1530 as its earliest instance). Romance was, and is, a term used to describe mediaeval and Renaissance tales – in verse of various forms, ranging from ballad to epic – concerning knights and their chivalric exploits. And the word "romantic", when it first appeared, described [...] what were perceived as the fictions of the old tales, with their enchanted castles, magicians, ogres and their representation of inflated feelings and impossible passions.[3]

The word obviously predated the romantic movement, which lasted from about 1750 to about 1870. It originated in central Europe, having in Rousseau and Goethe its two chief inspirational figures. Romanticism then spread from France and Germany to Britain and then to the rest of Europe and across to America.

It is generally accepted that the English Romanticism formally began in 1798, the year of publication of William Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads,* whose preface to the second edition (1800) has been regarded as a real manifesto of prime importance in laying down the principles for a new tradition in poetry. Rejecting the contemporary emphasis on form that drained poetic writing of strong emotion, the preface affirmed the paramount relevance of imagination and feeling to poetic creation. Focusing on the dichotomy emotion/reason, Elizabeth Fay writes:

> In the Enlightenment of the previous period, the "Age of Reason," reason was held to be the only true path to knowledge of the natural world and the human subject. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, emotion was thought to be a more pure response to nature and to other people than reason and proper behaviour alone.[4]

In the spirit of the new cultural movement, romantic writers expanded their imaginary horizons both spatially and chronologically, turning back to the past (chiefly the Middle Ages, as mentioned above) for themes and settings, which were often endowed with exotic appeal. The oriental setting of Xanadu evoked by Coleridge in "Kubla Khan" provides us with an eloquent example of the romantic use of exoticism. The trend spread to prose literature as well, the novel being a fully established form by then. The gothic genre (which was, according to some scholars, a precursor and, to others, a subsidiary of the romantic school) took late eighteenth century by storm and has been regarded by feminist critics as truly revolutionary, since some of its earliest and most celebrated practitioners were women – Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee, Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley were particularly prominent figures in this tradition. Readership was, in turn, mostly female as well. In *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*, Elizabeth Fay devotes a chapter to the gothic literature produced by women writers, where she states:

> The novelistic genre that came to fruition in the Romantic period and that best captures the popular imagination of Romantic culture is the Gothic. The gothic is escapist fiction that explores the threshold between the real and the supernatural, between what is knowable and what is known. It does so by exploiting characters' and readers' fears about the unknown and it compels us by promising mystery and intrigue. [...] It is typically set in the past and in another land, such as Germany or Italy, and it tends to focus on the beautiful and the desirable heroine whose fate is to be victimized by the villainous father figure.[5]

At this point, a detailed reference must be made to a Scottish author of unquestionable relevance to both British and Western literature and whose work must necessarily be taken into account when tackling the wider topic of the relation between literature and history, and particularly that of literature's representation of the past: Walter Scott. An immensely prolific writer, Scott translated German gothic romances, edited a collection of ballads and wrote poetry, which made him hugely popular. However, it was as historical novelist that he achieved real eminence. In less than fifteen years he wrote over twenty historical novels usually referred to as *the Waverley Novels*, thus named after the first of the series, *Waverley*, subtitled *'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814), which brought Walter Scott enormous success. These narratives take up themes chiefly from Scottish history, the Middle Ages, and Reformation times. In the opening chapter of his influential discussion of the historical novel, *Der historische Roman* (1937), the Marxist critic Georg Lukács famously credited Scott with having invented the genre:

> The historical novel arose at the beginning of the nineteenth century at about the time of Napoleon's collapse (Scott's *Waverley* appeared in 1814). Of course, novels with historical themes are to be found in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, too, and, should one feel inclined, one can treat medieval adaptations of classical history of myth as "precursors" of the historical novel and indeed go back still further to China or India. But one will find nothing here that sheds any real light on the phenomenon of the historical novel. [...] What is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age.[6]

Lukács ranks Scott's genius well above all the practitioners of the genre – "Scott's unequalled historical genius"[7] – which in his view lies, to a great extent, in a historically convincing interplay of socially diverse characters skilfully built. Curiously enough, his novels' characters, and specifically their heroes, have often been criticised for their dullness and so, in his analysis, Lukács shows he's fully aware that he is engaging in a dialogue with some of Scott's contemporaries and later critics who addressed the issue:

> In later criticism this choice of hero was sharply criticized, for example by Taine. Such later critics saw here a symptom of Scott's own mediocrity as an artist. Precisely the opposite is true. That he builds his novels round a "middling", merely correct and never heroic "hero" is the clearest proof of Scott's exceptional and revolutionary epic gifts [...].[8]

He concedes, nonetheless, that Scott's characters lack psychological depth but, as he sees it, the novelist makes it up for that shortcoming: "Scott does not command the magnificent, profound psychological dialectics of character which distinguishes the novel of the last great period of bourgeois development. (...) Scott's greatness lies in his capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types."[9] Lukács's premise is that by casting "the mediocre, prosaic hero as the central figure," Scott distances himself from romantic authors like Byron, following instead the realist tradition and it is therefore "completely wrong to see Scott as a Romantic writer [...].[10] Earlier on in his study Lukács had stated: "Scott's historical novel is the direct continuation of the great realist social novel of the eighteenth century."[11] When these words were published in 1937, this was a completely new perception of Scott's oeuvre given the fact that earlier criticism had depicted him as a typical romantic.

More recently, doubts have been cast over Walter Scott's status as creator of the historical novel – some literary historians still regard Scott as the "father" of the genre, while others see him as the inheritor of a tradition begun earlier. Elizabeth Wesseling takes the latter position when she writes that "we would do Scott too much honour by giving him sole credit for the 'invention' of this literary form."[12] This assertion is meant to be valid from both an Anglo-Saxon and international point of view. In Germany, for instance, research on literature produced in the late eighteenth century has led scholars to stress quite emphatically that as early as the 1790s the historical novel had already developed as an independent literary genre. Yet there is a widespread consensus that it came into its own with the publication of *Waverley*, gaining shape and credibility with the impressive body of work produced by its author. As Wesseling herself puts it:

> Scott, however, was definitely the most successful practitioner of early historical fiction. As the first best-selling writer in the history of English literature, he managed to raise the historical novel to great heights of both prestige and popularity with his *Waverley, or 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814), thereby imprinting an indelible mark upon the primary phase of the genre's diachronic development.[13]

Walter Scott's fame and popularity were, indeed, such that he soon eclipsed his predecessors and their work, and, as his influence grew and spread both home and abroad, the writers that, in the wake of the Waverley Novels, wrote narratives under this genre saw themselves (and were seen by others) as being indebted to Scott, rather than to other authors.

Overtly revealing their imaginative component, but nonetheless combining it with historical materials, those novels straddled the historiographical and literary domains to occupy a hybrid territory and were, therefore, perceived as a literary innovation. It seems Scott's contemporary readers were not alone in perceiving the Waverley Novels as something new and different from the literature they had read before. The novelist himself perceived them as such, too, as Harold Orel tells us: "But he [Walter Scott] was doing something without true precedent and he knew it."[14] This is a perception that is made clear in his various novels' prefaces, in which he explained his ideas and intentions and answered attacks on the ways in which his narratives represented history. If, on the one hand, Scott's novels in themselves may seem to have limited appeal for today's literary criticism, given the flaws that are often pointed to them (the sometimes hastily constructed plots and stilted characters are usually seen as their most conspicuous shortcomings), it is, on the other hand, beyond question that their relevance in their day and the debate they stirred over the relationship between fact and fiction are reasons enough for them to be of major interest still nowadays. Scott aimed at plausibility, not at absolute historical accuracy, openly defining his type of fiction as "romance, or a fictitious narrative, founded upon history"[15] but that wasn't enough to spare him harsh criticism from some of his contemporaries for his use of historical material. It should be stressed at this point that literature and history clearly parted ways in the nineteenth century. Until then, history was regarded primarily as a branch of literature, which allowed historians to write accounts of the past whose vividness of character sketches and attention paid to language and style made their kinship with literary works quite clear. Focusing specifically on Renaissance history, Susana Onega writes:

> [T]he Renaissance historian was perfectly aware of and free to acknowledge the narrative nature of history. He often wrote history in poetic prose, or even verse and had no qualms in colouring the historical facts with his own subjective opinions and digressions. Indeed, the Renaissance historian was always ready to sacrifice objectivity to aesthetic coherence, to his moral aim and to the display of his subjective creativity.[16]

The foundations of modern historiography began to be laid in the eighteenth century and it acquired its status as an independent academic discipline in the early nineteenth century, which was followed by a wave of enthusiasm for historical studies. The academicisation of history paved the way for the production, in the second half of the century, of highly influential historical works by a number of recognised masters of the discipline. As Hayden White observes in his seminal work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe,*

> This period was characterized by sustained debate over historical theory and by consistent production of massive narrative accounts of past cultures and societies. It was during this phase that the four great "masters" of nineteenth-century historiography – Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt – produced their principal works.
>
> What is most striking about the historiography of this phase is the degree of theoretical self-consciousness in which its representatives carried out their investigations of the past and composed their narrative accounts of it.[17]

Having established itself as a legitimate and distinct discipline, historiography developed in the process its own critical method and approach, requiring rigorous, thorough research work from its practitioners. Of the four masters referred to by White, Leopold von Ranke is the one who is generally recognised as the founder of the modern school of historical writing, having famously maintained that the historian's task is to give an account of the past based on fact or, as Rank put it in a much-quoted phrase, to show the past *how it really was*. Rank's aim was to reconstruct the past avoiding the pitfalls of arbitrariness and subjectivity which, in his view, marred the historical method of contemporary historiography. To attain his goal, Rank insisted on dispassionate objectivity as the historian's proper point of view and made the scrupulous use of primary sources a law of historical reconstruction.

Against the background of historicism's wide influence, Scott's novels became vulnerable to censure on the score of historical inaccuracies. Despite his clear admission of the fictitious nature of his novels, the fact is a number of readers seemed to turn to his narratives searching for historical truth and, among his wide readership, was none other than Ranke himself, as Hayden White tells us:

> In a passage that has become canonical in the historiographical profession's credo of orthodoxy, the Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke characterizes the historical method of which he was the founder in terms of its opposition to the principles of representation found in Sir Walter Scott's novels of romance. Ranke had been enchanted with the pictures Scott had drawn of the Age of Chivalry. They had inspired him a desire to know that age more fully, to experience it more immediately. And so he had gone to the sources of medieval history, documents and contemporary accounts of life in that time. He was shocked to discover not only that Scott's pictures were largely products of fancy but that the actual life of the Middle Ages was more fascinating than any novelistic account of it could ever be.[18]

Yet this had been envisaged by Scott all along – he intended his novels, however fictitious, to stimulate his readers' interest in historical matters, thus helping to develop a love of knowledge which would, then, have to be fed on non-fictional sources:

> [T]he love of knowledge wants but a beginning – the least spark will give fire when the train is properly prepared; and having been interested in fictitious adventures, ascribed to an historical period and characters, the reader begins next to be anxious to learn what the facts really were, and how far the novelist has justly represented them.[19]

Walter Scott is here announcing the didactic purpose of the historical novel – he perceived the genre as a means of spreading historical knowledge, potentially providing readers with information they might not otherwise have acquired and which could eventually lead them to carry out their own researches into bygone eras.

The charges of falsehood made against Scott's novels can be understood as the predictable reaction from those who believed that the borders between literature and history should not be meddled with at a time when they had clearly grown apart as separate domains. By mixing the factual with the fictional, Scott was undermining that clear-cut distinction and, somehow, resurrecting the fluidity which had defined the borders between those two fields for centuries. Curiously enough, in Western literature, one of the earliest attempts to establish a clear distinction between the historian's task and that of the writer of literary texts dates back to the fourth century BC, a “mere” century after Herodotus, often called the father of history, wrote his celebrated account of the Persian Wars. It was made by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, where he famously stated:

> The historian and the poet are not distinguished by their use of verse or prose; it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into verse, and it would be a history in verse just as much as in prose. The distinction is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that would happen.
>
> For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars.[20]

By forcefully granting poetry a higher status, ascribing to that type of writing the capacity to reveal universal truth, as opposed to history, which Aristotle defined as fact-bound, the Greek philosopher started a long-lasting debate whose subsequent contributions would inevitably have to engage in a dialogue with the *Poetics*. It was, however, not until the Renaissance that Aristotle’s text became widely known and influential. Philip Sidney, to take an example, subscribed wholeheartedly to Aristotle’s position. He was just as vigorous in his enunciation of the merits of literature over those of history, arguing that only the first could “teach and delight” because “the historian [...] is so tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine.”[21] But among Sidney’s contemporaries there were also the ones who challenged these views. One of the first thinkers of the early modern period to dispute Aristotle’s relegation of history to a lesser status was Francis Bacon, who reversed Aristotle’s hierarchical positions. Tamsin Spargo successfully sums up his views when she tells us that

> rationalism and empiricism, championed by Francis Bacon, allotted history a more serious epistemological status. Inductive reasoning based on observation by a detached observer was the proper activity of the historian and scientist alike and would contribute to humanity’s ever-expanding knowledge of the world. Poetry was pleasing and popular but the imagination was not a proper tool for the serious work of historical enquiry.[22]

The debate over the historian’s role intensified throughout the subsequent centuries and, as history established itself as a separate and independent epistemology, the status and task of the historian, as well as history’s own essence and purpose, were examined carefully not only by historians themselves but also – and perhaps chiefly – by philosophers of history. Hegel was one of the most prominent and influential figures to make a significant contribution in this philosophical field, having presented reason and freedom as history’s two key explanatory categories. As he saw it, history is not a random set of events, but a rational process – the realisation of the spirit of freedom. Having dealt extensively with the concept of history, Hegel also dealt specifically with historical writing, and, following the Aristotelian tradition, he felt it necessary to analyse the differences as well as the similarities between poetry and the writing of history. As Hayden White puts it, having found affinities between those two types of text, Hegel "launched into a discussion of history as the prose form closest in its immediacy to poetry in general and Drama in particular."[23] He made it nonetheless quite clear that, although history's form may be poetic, its contents are rooted in common life, as experienced collectively by any given people, and are, therefore, prosaic. In Part III of his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (delivered in the 1820s and first published in 1835), Hegel maintained that the historian should not "expunge these prosaic characteristics of his content or to convert them into others more poetical; his narrative must embrace what lies actually before him and in the shape he finds it without amplification [*ohne umzudeuten*] or at least poetical transformation."[24] Only poets are allowed to fully use their creative freedom: "To poetry alone is the liberty permitted to dispose without restriction of the material submitted in such a way that it becomes, even regarded on the side of the external condition, conformable with the ideal truth."[25]

It naturally seems to follow that, if on the one hand historians can't possibly turn the writing of history into the product of their fancy and imagination, their prose is, on the other hand, bound to be influenced by the literature they read and admire. And so it was in Hegel's own time. Elisabeth Wesseling is quite clear about the impact of fiction – historical fiction, in particular – on the nineteenth-century historiography:

> Due to the tremendous popularity of the *Waverley Novels* and the fiction written in their wake, historians ran the risk of being ousted as the major mediators between past and present. It is not surprising, therefore, that various leading nineteenth-century historians took some of the lessons about the lively representation of history which could be derived from Scott's novels to heart.[25]

Conversely, writers of historical fiction can be influenced by prevailing trends in historical writing and by changes in the concept of history. In fact, historical novelists' indebtedness to contemporary historiography has been traced to the earliest practitioners of the genre, and amongst them Walter Scott himself. Fully aware of this mutual influence, it becomes indeed virtually impossible for today's criticism to determine the exact extent of nineteenth-century historical novelists' influence upon the writings produced by contemporary historians and vice versa. Hayden White's description of the Romantic historiography – whose recognised masters include, for instance, Thomas Carlyle and Jules Michelet – as a “historiography in which the depiction of the variety, color and vividness of the historical field is taken as the central aim of the historian’s work,”[27] immediately brings to mind a leading feature of the novels written by Scott and his followers, namely the vivid recreation of the milieu of former epochs, with a special focus on the daily lives of ordinary people and on the variety of their customs, traditions and language. This *couleur locale* would, in fact, come to be seen as the hallmark of the classical historical novel.[28] One can, thus, feel tempted to ask with Diane Elam, “which came first, the historical chicken or the romantic egg?”[29]

The close interrelation between these two types of writing has increasingly become the object of extensive analysis and debate within both domains and over the last decades the focus hasn’t been so much on what divides them (as it was clearly the case in the *Poetics* and, to some extent, in Hegel’s writings on the issue), but rather on what unites them. This has led scholars to draw a direct parallel between the academicisation of historiography in the early nineteenth century and the spectacular rise to literary prominence of the historical novel, which took place at that time. Wesseling is one of the scholars who establish such a nexus: “The nineteenth-century professionalisation of historiography, for instance, is bound to be of the utmost importance to the status of the historical novel [...].”[30]

If, on the one hand, the first decades (roughly the first half) of the nineteenth century can be seen as the golden age of both historiography and historical fiction, as the century came to its end both domains underwent considerable changes – historiography was thrown into turmoil and the historical novel à la Scott entered a phase of decline – which, once again, may be regarded as something other than mere coincidence. With respect to historiography, the so-called crisis of historicism developed during the last third of the century as Rank’s idea of impartiality was challenged by influential thinkers who raised growing doubts about the possibility of an objective reconstruction of the past. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was particularly vigorous in denouncing history’s claims of objectivity as ultimately spurious. As White observes, “Nietzsche, as much as Marx, provided the grounds for that fall into the ‘crisis of historicism’ to which the historical thought of his age succumbed.”[31] In fact, Nietzsche’s attacks on contemporary historiography went much beyond its empiricist notion of impartiality, as White explains in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*:

> Nietzsche hated history even more than he hated religion. History promoted a debilitating voyeurism in men, made them feel that they were latecomers to a world in which everything worth doing had already been done, and thereby undermined that impulse to heroic exertion that might give a peculiarly human, if only transient, meaning to an absurd world.[32]

The decline in history's status and authority was paralleled, as mentioned above, by a similar phenomenon in the domain of historical fiction. In Britain, Scott's death in 1832 might have led some to expect that the genre's vast readership would soon be dwindling fast, but no such thing happened – not at first. For the next few decades, both Scott's novels and those of his followers were still avidly read and the genre managed to retain its immense prestige. However, the passing of the time proved to be inexorable to this type of narrative. Some scholars who have carried out studies in this area point out the mid-1880s as the period when the genre's popularity clearly got into a downward spiral; others put it earlier, around the mid-1860s, a period after which there was a decline in historical novels' publication numbers. Apart from drawing attention to the dwindling numbers of novels published between the mid-1860s and the early 1890s, they also observe that by then the traditional historical novel was starting to give way to a type of fiction which, rather than being respectful of Clio, privileged a lighter and more fanciful approach to the past. Harold Orel sums up this development quite clearly:

> By the mid-1860s writers of historical novels had lost faith in the value of conscientiously translating vellum-bound documents, of modernizing terms and expressions for which exact counterparts were lacking. Inevitably, the time was approaching when more romance and less matter would appeal to authors and readers alike.[33]

Romance is often considered a slippery word to define given the fact that throughout the times it has been used to describe a seemingly heterogeneous body of texts written by authors as diverse as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Louis Stevenson, or Georgette Heyer. A.S. Byatt also calls her Booker Prize winner *Possession* (1990), "*A Romance*," quoting, in one of the books' epigraphs from Nathaniel Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851):

> When a writer calls his book a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former – while as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart – has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation...[34]

As conveyed by Hawthorne’s words, romance relies strongly on fantasy and is, therefore, a type of narrative which frees its author from the tight constraints imposed by literary representations striving not only for verisimilitude and probability but also for accuracy. Writing about the romantic historical narratives which ruled over the British popular fiction market between the 1890s and the 1910s, Helen Hughes states:

> The major themes of romance are adventure and sexual love, with a narrow range of behaviour and experience being portrayed. Well-known stories, reassuring in their familiarity, are used and re-used. For essentially the romance is written to entertain: it frees the reader from “inhibitions and preoccupations” by drawing him or her into its own world.
>
> All romantic historical fiction contains a good many common features. Setting is subordinate to plot. The social world portrayed is primarily an aristocratic one.[35]

It is the genre’s formulaic and fantastic nature which Hughes identifies as its distinguishing feature: “Although the term ‘historical romance’ is sometimes used indiscriminately by publishers and booksellers for historical novels of all descriptions, the name is more commonly reserved for books of this type [characterised by distinctive stock situations and stereotyped characters].”[36]

For the practitioners of the historical romance that flourished in the late nineteenth century, literature should primarily provide readers with a pastime, therefore producing a definitely more escapist brand of fiction. These writers set themselves the prime goal of entertaining the reading public with their works, and no longer seemed to endorse the opinion that historical fiction should pursue the didactic purpose of presenting itself as a vehicle for conveying historical knowledge or suggesting that there were lessons to be learned from the past. Those were, in fact, the principles which had guided the British historical fiction from its early days, having actually been emphasised from around mid-century onwards, till the 1880s. By then, however, writers had stopped emulating novelists like Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade or George Eliot, who had conducted painstaking researches into the past in their attempt to resurrect bygone eras in their historical novels. Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), *The Last of the Barons* (1843) and *Harold, The Last of the Saxon Kings* (1848), Wilkie Collins’s *Antonina or The Fall of Rome* (1850), Charles Reade’s *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861) and Eliot’s *Romola* (1863) are commonly pointed out as examples of laboriously researched novels. George Eliot’s case, in particular, is recurrently referred to in studies focusing on historical fiction, which tend to describe the writing of *Romola* as a very anxious and even painful process because of the novelist’s extreme fidelity to printed records containing information on the life of Savonarola, a fifteenth-century Italian martyred crusader on whom the novel focuses. Because, as Diane Elam explains us, Eliot believed that "historical romance must proceed from an encyclopedic knowledge of the past,"[37] she spent endless hours reading and researching both in Florence, where she could be found a year after her first visit "busily foraging for material for her new novel"[38] and in London, at the British Museum. Even so, the novelist went through spells of despair, fearful of misrepresenting Savonarola to her readers, and lacking confidence in her ability to put the novel together. This was a task that, as her private writings reveal, completely obsessed her.

By late nineteenth century, however, practitioners of romantic historical fiction regarded such cases as clear examples of writers sacrificing their artistic creativity in their efforts to attain historical accuracy. Robert Louis Stevenson, a leading figure of the new literary tradition, was quite open about his refusal to accept any responsibility on the part of the novelist to draw moral lessons from the past or convey the socially-charged messages found in contemporary realist literature. In an article entitled "Books which have influenced me" (1887), Stevenson wrote: "The most influential books, and the truest in their influence, are works of fiction. They do not pin the reader to a dogma, which he must afterwards discover to be inexact; they do not teach him a lesson, which he must afterwards unlearn."[39] In stories like *Kidnapped* (1886), he combined shipwreck, murder, and escape, ingredients which delighted legions of fans, turning him into one of the most successful and best-loved authors of his day. Issues like urban poverty, social inequalities based on class distinctions or the changes brought about by industrialisation, which had been commonly dealt with in the realist novels by Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens or Mrs Gaskell, were notoriously avoided by Stevenson and his fellow practitioners of romantic historical fiction.

However, among the many authors who wrote the historical romances that dominated the book market around the turn of the century, very few managed to stand the test of time. Apart from Stevenson, Conan Doyle, or Rider Haggard, whose names (not always their works, though) are still familiar to modern readers worldwide, there was an immense group of writers, both male and female, who maintained their fame and popularity with a constant stream of romances but who were eventually unable to keep the reading public's interest alive after WW I, sinking into oblivion shortly afterwards in most cases. The escapist appeal of the swashbuckling historical romance, whose vital components included fighting, treachery, narrow escapes and extraordinary coincidences, with real events in history seeming less and less important, remained strong throughout the Great War but was virtually lost by 1920. Historical fiction did not disappear altogether but, far from dominating the lists of leading books, it was pushed into a niche market whose impact on the literary scene was very limited. As Helen Hughes observes, "a few writers, like [Rafael] Sabatini, continued to write the same kind of book and find a market until the 1950s, but their work was beginning to seem decidedly old-fashioned."[40] In fact, it seems reasonable to argue that, had it not been for WW I, the market for this kind of fiction would have declined some years earlier. In the post-war period, a new generation of writers directly challenged the traditional way in which the novel told a story, maintaining that it proved to be inadequate for giving shape to a radically changed perception and experience of reality. This shift in world-view and in literary values led to a critical reassessment of the literature produced in the Scott-Stevenson tradition, which was found completely dated and outmoded. Virginia Woolf, one of the new authors dominating the literary scene in the 1920s, quite straightforwardly assessed the Scott legacy in an essay written in 1924: "There are some writers who have entirely ceased to influence others, whose fame is for that reason both serene and cloudless, who are enjoyed or neglected rather than criticised and read. Among them is Scott [...]."[41] Other influential figures of that period expressed their views on the subject, namely Virginia's father, Leslie Stephen, and the novelist Henry James, both of them broadly sharing Woolf's assessment. Her work as a novelist was guided by notions and principles altogether different from the ones associated with the literature produced hitherto. Her generation of writers tended to give absolute priority to the representation of the inner life of characters and in Virginia Woolf's own novels this distinctive feature of the modernist fiction was given full expression. Rejecting traditional narrative techniques and definitions of reality, she was determined to expand the scope of the novel beyond mere storytelling. She, therefore, adopted a poetic style and plot became virtually non-existent in her novels. Focus was, instead, put on the flow of random personal impressions, feelings and thoughts of the characters. This technique – the stream-of-consciousness or interior monologue – was precisely one of her most important contributions to modern literature. Although she wasn't the first to experiment with it (Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce are usually pointed out as the pioneers) and many other writers (both of the Anglo-Saxon world and from continental Europe) became associated with the technique, Virginia Woolf used it with indisputable mastery. Because hers was fundamentally an introspective fiction, it's hardly surprising that she should criticise in Scott what she also criticised in later writers like Arnold Bennet, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells, namely the way they sacrificed the psychological depth of their novels' characters at the expense of the description of external reality: "Scott's characters, indeed, suffer from a serious disability; it is only when they speak that they are alive; they never think; as for prying into their minds himself, or drawing inferences from their behaviour, Scott never attempted it."[42]

Given the modernist writers' interest in the individual consciousness, and the consequent tendency of the novel to move away from representations of social life towards the inner experiences of the characters, the leading novelists of the period seemed to find limited appeal in historical fiction and there were only a few (but nonetheless significant) contributions to this area. Curiously enough, two of Virginia Woolf's novels, *Orlando* (1928) and *Between the Acts* (1941), are experiments in historical fiction but their departures from the traditional model are such that they only began to be read as modernist experiments with the historical novel in the 1960s. It's interesting to notice that *Between the Acts* was published at a time when the historical fiction written in the Scott-Stevenson tradition was going through a resurgence because, for obvious reasons, with a war going on, there was a new demand for escapist fictions. After 1945, however, those narratives were once again regarded as passé as they had been in the years between the wars.

This chapter focuses specifically on the historical fiction produced in Britain, but if its scope were wider it would be possible to demonstrate that historical fiction in the Anglo-Saxon tradition as a whole and in other European literatures experienced a very similar development, with peaks of popularity and periods of decline coinciding broadly across those literary traditions. By mid-century its prestige was not only tarnished but positively gone – although the genre did not wholly disappear it was regarded as hopelessly dated and even reactionary. For instance, when L.P. Hartley published *The Go-Between* – whose first sentence was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, – a novel set in 1900 (but significantly different from the historical novel's traditional model), there was among the reviews one which particularly baffled, or angered, the author, leading him to write, in

1962, an Introduction to the novel in which he addressed the criticism and disputed the critic’s notion that it is “decadent” to write narratives about the past.

By then, it could hardly be expected that the genre would experience such a surprising revival, and reshaping, under Postmodernism, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

Notes

1 L.P. Hartley. *The Go-Between*. 1953. Oxford: Heinemann, 1988 (1985): p. 9.

2 Henry A. Beers. *A History of English Romanticism in the Eighteenth Century*. 1899. New York: Dover Publications, 1968: p.2.

3 Aidan Day. *Romanticism*. London: Routledge, 1996: p. 79.

4 Elizabeth Fay. *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*. Malden (Massachusetts) and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998: p. 5.

5 *Ibid*. p. 108.

6 Georg Lukács. *The Historical Novel*. 1937. Translated from the German by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. London: Merlin Press, 1962: p. 19.

7 *Ibid*. p. 40.

8 *Ibid*. p. 33.

9 *Ibid*. pp. 34-5.

10 *Ibid*. p. 34.

11 *Ibid*. p. 31.

12 Elisabeth Wesseling. *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1991: p. 27.

13 *Ibid*.

14 Harold Orel. *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini: Changing Attitudes towards a Literary Genre, 1814-1920*. London: Macmillan Press, 1995: p. 7.

15 Walter Scott. *Peveril of the Peak*. 1822. London: Fredonia Books, 2002: p. xv (Prefatory Letter).

16 Susana Onega. “Introduction.” *Telling Stories: Narrativizing History, Historicizing Literature*. Ed. Susana Onega. Amsterdam – Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995: p.8.

17 Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975 (1973): p. 39.

18 *Ibid.* p. 163.

19 Walter Scott. *Peveril of the Peak.* p. xvii.

20 Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Malcolm Heath. London: Penguin, 1996: p.15

21 Philip Sidney quoted in Maria de Jesus Relvas. "O Debate Renascentista sobre a Primazia das Artes em Inglaterra: Literatura versus História." *Literatura e História: para uma prática interdisciplinar (Colóquio)*. Lisbon, 14/16 November 2002.

22 Tamsin Spargo. "Introduction: Past, Present and Future Pasts." *Reading the Past*. Ed. Tamsin Spargo. Houndmill (Basingstoke, Hampshire): Palgrave, 2000: p.4.

23 Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. p. 88.

24 Hegel quoted in Hayden White. *Ibid.* p.91

25 *Ibid.* p. 92.

26 Elisabeth Wesseling. *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*. pp. 45-6.

27 Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. p. 14.

28 Eduard Fueter, in his work *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (1911), labelled historians such as Michelet, Thiery and Ranke as the *couleur locale* school, thus pointing out their indebtedness to Scott.

29 Diane Elam. *Romancing the Postmodern*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992: p. 55. Elam asks this question in a chapter in which she carries out a critical revaluation of Scott's work ("Delayed in the post: Walter Scott and the progress of romance"), focusing on the relation between history and romance in his novels and putting forward the interesting (surprising, some would say) argument that they are inherently postmodern: "Scott's texts explode in a welter of textuality: marginalia, footnotes, parodic scholarship. And that textual excess revolves around the unstable relationship between something called history and something called romance, in a way that inclines me to refer to 'historical romance,' in Scott's hands, as 'postmodern romance'" (51).

30 Elisabeth Wesseling. *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*. p.54.

31 Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. p. 41.

32 Hayden White. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985 (1978): p. 32.

33 Harold Orel. *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini: Changing Attitudes towards a Literary Genre, 1814-1920*. p. 25.

34 Nathaniel Hawthorne quoted in A.S. Byatt. *Possession: A Romance*. London: Vintage, 1990.

35 Helen Hughes. *The Historical Romance*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993: p. 2.

36 *Ibid*.

37 Diane Elam. *Romancing the Postmodern*. p. 118.

38 Andrew Sanders. *The Victorian Novel 1840 – 1880*. London: Macmillan, 1993 (1978): p. 172.

39 Robert Louis Stevenson quoted in Harold Orel. *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini: Changing Attitudes towards a Literary Genre, 1814-1920*. p. 38.

40 Helen Hughes. *The Historical Romance*. p. 3.

41 Virginia Woolf quoted in Elisabeth Wesseling. *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*. p. 67.

42 *Ibid.* p. 68.

2. The Postmodernist revival of historical fiction

Anyone researching on postmodernism these days will have no shortage of reference works to read, analyse and engage with. The proliferation of publications which directly or indirectly address postmodernism may be seen as symptom of the fact that it is a subject about which there is no widespread critical consensus – far from that. Postmodernism has, indeed, been the object of diverse theoretical analysis and evaluations and, consequently, among scholars different views are held on its aesthetic affiliations, cultural relevance, or virtues and limitations on the whole. It is, therefore, a subject debated passionately and the theorists often seem to be part of one of two polarised camps: the defenders versus the detractors. This is, at least, the idea one draws from the critical work carried out by distinguished scholars like Linda Hutcheon, a leading figure in the Anglo-Saxon theory on postmodernism. In her influential studies *A Poetics of Postmodernism – History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) she recurrently uses terms such as “promoters,” “supporters,” and “defenders” to refer to those scholars who have made favourable evaluations of postmodernism, describing the ones who have taken the opposite views as “detractors,” enemies,” or “foes.” She explicitly addresses this divide, stating that “in terms of evaluation there are two clearly opposed ‘camps’ in the postmodern wars: the radically antagonistic and the provisionally supportive.”[1] (It seems, though, that Hutcheon herself is not merely a “provisional” but rather a staunch supporter of postmodernism.) It’s particularly ironic to notice that in the postmodern age, when the logic of “either/or” has been discredited and denounced as artificial and useless, such a flagrant binary opposition should exist at the very heart of critical theory on postmodernism. Contradictions like this one are, however, anything but common in postmodernism – it is, in fact, a cultural phenomenon which is usually described as fundamentally contradictory and paradoxical. Its contradictory nature may actually be regarded as one of the very few facts about which there is consensus of opinion among theorists, regardless of their stance on the postmodern enterprise.

The uncertainties, and even confusion, associated with this area of study – and with the term “postmodernism” itself (or with any of its derivatives) – are successfully highlighted by Brian McHale:

> “Postmodernist”? Nothing about this term is unproblematic, nothing about it is entirely satisfactory. It is not even clear who deserves the credit – or the blame – for coining it in the first place: Arnold Toynbee? Charles Olson? Randall Jarrell? There are plenty of candidates. But whoever is responsible, he or she has a lot to answer for.

> “Postmodernist”? Nobody *likes* the term.
>
> (...)
>
> “Postmodernist”? The term does not even make sense. For if “modern” means “pertaining to the present,” then “post-modern” can only mean “pertaining to the future,” and in that case what could postmodernist fiction be except fiction that has not yet been written? Either the term is a solecism, or this “post” does not mean what the dictionary tells us it ought to mean, but only functions as a kind of intensifier.[2]

It is, in fact, quite hard to come up with a straightforward definition of postmodernism comprehensive enough to convey the concept’s full complexity. Therefore, any such attempt will, as a rule, warn its readers about its own limitations, thus avoiding totalising assertions which would be completely out of tune with the postmodern discourse. Alexandra Lavau provides us with a clear example:

> *Defining what postmodernism actually is presents certain difficulties, since to represent it as a coherent and stable poetics is to deny its project from the outset*. Postmodernism describes a set of aesthetic practices that destabilize the truths or paradigms – of history, of ethics – by which Western culture represents a unified, perceptible reality whose concepts have a continuous meaning for everyone.[3]

However, the focus of this chapter is not postmodernism as a wide-ranging cultural phenomenon stretching across the arts, humanities and social sciences and, consequently, no attempt will be made to address postmodernism as such. Topics like the movement’s internal contradictions, the nature of its relation to modernism or its interweaving with the postcolonial and post-structuralist discourses will not be the central concern of this analysis, which intends to deal, instead, with the postmodernist attitude towards the past and its representations, examining how that postmodernist interest in history has led to a revival of historical fiction in contemporary literature, not only within but also outside the Anglo-Saxon world.

Postmodernism’s attitude towards history has proved to be a highly contentious issue, given the great disparity of judgements that have been expressed on the subject. The academics who have joined the discussion have turned it into a lively debate, taking sides and putting forward their arguments, thus exemplifying how the study of the postmodern phenomenon can easily become a controversial activity. The leading participants in this theoretical debate have by now become ubiquitous references in all studies on the subject and their arguments have, therefore, been widely analysed and discussed. The critics of postmodernism – amongst whom scholars like Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton have achieved a special prominence – describe it as lacking historical and political substance. In

"Postmodernism and Consumer Society" Jameson expresses his views quite clearly when he states:

> I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system. I will only be able, however, to show this for one major theme: namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.[4]

His Marxist premises inspire him to make a very harsh judgement about contemporary capitalist society, which he sees as suffering from historical amnesia and "incapable of dealing with time and history."[5] As he correlates the emergence of postmodernism with consumer capitalism, he regards the first as the cultural expression of the latter, identifying pastiche as one of its most significant features, not just in literature but also in other areas such as music and film. Jameson explains:

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without satirical impulse, without laughter [...]. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor [...].[6]

The obvious implication that arises from such an assumption is that the postmodernist aesthetic is sterile and condemns its practitioners to a mere imitation of old styles. The "nostalgia film" is presented as one of the most common examples of the postmodernist pastiche – it is a cultural product whose "formal apparatus [...] has trained us to consume the past in the form of glossy images."[7] In other words, for Fredric Jameson, it "seems to reduce itself to the recombination of various stereotypes of the past."[8]

According to Jameson, because postmodernist art is incapable of innovation, it is also devoid of subversive power, unlike modernism, before it. He contrasts the two aesthetics, characterising modernism as an oppositional art which, due to its radically new style, challenged the conventions, values and moral taboos of the bourgeois Victorian and post-Victorian society "for whom its forms and ethos are received as being variously ugly, dissonant, obscure, scandalous, immoral, subversive, and generally 'antisocial.'"[9] Jameson argues that, unlike modernism, which was passionately repudiated in its day by the bourgeoisie due to its scandalous and shocking nature, postmodernism, given its totally different social position, cannot possibly be the object of such a judgement:

> My own conclusion here must take the form of a question about the critical value of the newer art. There is some agreement that the older modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like. Can anything of the sort be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment? We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism; the most significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic.[10]

He, therefore, maintains that postmodernism has brought about the commodification of culture – art no longer adopts a critical distance from contemporary society, it has become a mere commodity.

Long before Jameson's analysis of postmodernism, other Marxist critics as influential as Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin had drawn similar conclusions about art's vulnerability to the nefarious influence of capitalist society. In his study of Baudelaire, Benjamin argued that, under capitalism, art is induced to become a commodity and, interestingly, Lukács found in modernism failings that were not fundamentally different from the ones that, years later, Jameson would identify in postmodernism. Praising instead the literary realism of novelists like Balzac, Lukács saw modernism as an aesthetic undermined by two of its leading features – the attenuation of reality and dissolution of personality, which he saw as interdependent: "the stronger the one, the stronger the other. Underlying both is the lack of a consistent view of human nature. Man [sic] is reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments."[11] Peter Brooker therefore draws a parallel between Lukács's criticism of modernism and later evaluations of postmodernism: "even though few would now endorse it in its original terms, Georg Lukács's dismissal of modernism as a nihilistic and subjectivist symptom of alienation under capitalism has returned as a judgement upon the later postmodernism."[12] The "judgement " Brooker refers to is obviously the one made by Jameson, but also by other contemporary scholars such as Charles Newman and Terry Eagleton, who follow a similar line of analysis because their critique of postmodernism is presented from a Marxist orientation as well. Among Eagleton's writings on the subject, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) is his most comprehensive work to date. In the preface he states quite straightforwardly that his "review of the topic is generally a negative one,"[13] but he appears not to subscribe to the idea of the rival camps debate – at least, not in such black and white terms. Describing postmodernism as a "portmanteau phenomenon" and himself as "a pluralist about postmodernism,"[14] Eagleton explains why, in his view, the for/against divide doesn't seem to make much sense:

> If postmodernism covers everything from punk rock to the death of metanarrative, fanzines to Foucault, then it is difficult to see how any single explanatory scheme could do justice to such a bizarrely heterogeneous entity. And if the creature is so diverse then it is hard to see how one could be in some simple sense either for or against it, any more than one could be for or against Peru.[15]

However, his actual discourse doesn't always confirm this apparent willingness to avoid reductionist assertions and present unbiased, balanced views on the subject. In fact, in his analysis he adopts a tone which is, at times, not merely ironic or sarcastic, but downright derogatory, as illustrated in the quotation that follows:

> Postmodernism is not delivering another narrative about history, just denying that history is in any sense story-shaped. The objection, in other words, is not to conceptually straight-jacketing history in this or that way, but to conceptually straight-jacketing it at all – *rather as Michel Foucault objects to particular regimes of power not on moral grounds – for where would such criteria spring from in his theory? – but simply on the grounds that they are regimes as such, and so, from some vague libertarian standpoint, inherently repressive. (The more pessimistic side of Foucault, however, is far too disenchanted to endorse his own mad dreams of multiplicity.)*[16]

The depreciatory remarks about Foucault end up discrediting the point Eagleton is here trying to make about postmodernism's stance on history, a topic to which he devotes considerable attention. Following Jameson's line of analysis, he is strongly critical of what he describes as the "postmodernist amnesia" and of the "political illiteracy and historical oblivion fostered by much postmodernism."[17] Eagleton sees the theory of the end of history (which, proceeding from Hegel's philosophy, was revived in the 1930s by Alexandre Kojève and taken up by Francis Fukuyama in the late 1980s) as lacking any real substance:

> [I]t would be worth asking ourselves who has the authority to blow the whistle and call history off. What are the historical conditions of the promulgation of the end of history? (...) If there was never any inner dynamic to history, wasn't it off already? Is all of it over, or just certain bits of it? The emancipation of oppressed peoples as well as the domination of Nature? And if foundations are now over, why is there so much foundationalism around?[18]

He then goes on to argue that

> What postmodernism refuses is not history but History – the idea that there is an entity called History possessed of an immanent meaning and purpose which is stealthily unfolding around us even as we speak. There is then something rather paradoxical about declaring an end to this entity, since in doing so one inevitably embraces the logic one refuses.[19]

This is, after all, one of the many contradictions that characterise postmodernism and which Eagleton explores extensively throughout his study. Linda Hutcheon, who stands on the other side of the theoretical fence, conducting a militant defence of postmodernism, sees these paradoxes as resulting from the fact that it "is a fundamentally contradictory entreprise."[20] Hers is "a paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world."[21] Hutcheon's studies on postmodernism reveal her as a very attentive reader of the works written on the subject by other scholars, engaging in a critical dialogue with them, particularly with those whose views on the topic tend to differ from her own. As far as the postmodernist attitude towards history is concerned, she strongly maintains that "postmodernism represents the attempt to re-historicize – not de-historicize – art and theory."[22] Answering the criticisms made by those who believe otherwise, she argues that "[t]o challenge history or its writing is not to deny either."[23] In other words, the postmodern discourse problematises historical knowledge and, while, doing so, raises the inevitable epistemological question: "How can we come to know the past real? Postmodernism does not deny it existed; it merely questions how we can know real past events today, except through their traces, their texts, the facts we construct and to which we grant meaning."[24] The writing of history is, then, a highly subjective and selective process because, as Arthur Danto put it, "one does not go naked into the archives,"[25] thus implying that historians construct versions of the past intended to achieve very specific goals, which derives from the legitimating role of official historiography. The archives themselves are inevitably partial for, as it is easily understood, documents traditionally contain far more information on the powerful and dominant than on the powerless and dispossessed. As Elisabeth Wesseling explains, "[t]he selective nature of the historical records in itself already accounts for the inextricably entanglement of historical knowledge and political power."[26] This correlation obviously echoes Foucault's celebrated theory of the close interdependence between power and knowledge. "History is written by the victors" is, then, much more than a catch-phrase – it is a principle which encapsulates the mechanism that has kept the ones who have suffered, rather than made, history out of the historical record, thus pushing them into oblivion.

The postmodernist discourse on this topic has been profoundly influenced by scholars like Hayden White and Michel Foucault, authors of valuable contributions to the debate about the nature and politics of representation in historical writing. Their works dispute the empiricist concept of history as a purely evidence-based enterprise, a view that is rooted in the belief in the separate existence of factual knowledge which can be directly inferred from the primary sources, with no interference from the historian's personal assumptions and commitments. The re-examination of history has challenged these notions and produced new insights into the role of historians in the writing of history. Because it became no longer acceptable that there can be an unmediated access to the past, it naturally follows that, rather than knowing the past as it really was, we can only know it as it is written up by historians, who, therefore, "contaminate" it with their own interpretation, judgements and preconceptions. The writing of history is, then, an ideologically charged undertaking, as White tells us in *Metahistory: Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*: "There does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality."[27] Further on, he adds that "ideological considerations enter into the historian's attempts to explain the historical field and to construct a verbal model of its processes in a narrative."[28] White places historians at the very centre of the process of generating historical knowledge, constructing the past, rather than *reconstructing* it, by interpreting its traces, its textualised remains. Their work is, then, not fundamentally different from that of a novelist because it also involves literary creation – the facts require the historian to organise them and give them meaning as a narrative. White's theoretical work converges with Foucault's, as both of them addressed the production of historical knowledge in very similar terms. As Alun Munslow explains, "the process of historical explanation for both White and Foucault is one of literary effect, rather than literal meaning. Historical explanation ultimately relies upon the use of tropes that we all use to express whole-part (and reverse) relationships [...]."[29]

It should be noted that White, Foucault and the many other historians and philosophers of history (including Dominick LaCapra, Frank Ankersmit, and Patrick Joyce) who, from the 1970s onwards have explored the textuality of history had two influential predecessors in Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood, "who in the first half of the twentieth century suggested that historians play an active role in constructing history by rethinking the past,"[30] as Munslow reminds us. In fact, White devotes a chapter of *Metahistory* to the analysis of Benedetto Croce's work and valuable contribution to the debate over history which he entered in the early 1890s, telling us that the Italian philosopher regarded historical knowledge as "knowledge of particular events in the past, data raised to the status of knowledge by virtue of the historian's identification of them as classes of phenomena and organized as elements of a narrative."[31] He, nonetheless, believed that the writing of history could and should result from thorough preliminary gathering of data and rigorous study of reality, thereby refusing to accept a relativist notion of history as the appropriate alternative to the empiricist one. Postmodernists, then, went a step further in challenging the status of history as a separate epistemology. As Linda Hutcheon explains,

> it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly convetionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality.[32]

The epistemological question of how we know the past is a major issue of theoretical debate and also a topic recurrently addressed in postmodernist historical fiction, as attested by a considerable body of fictional works which problematise historical knowledge by revisiting past eras and events, challenging widely-held notions and versions of that past and by focusing on the conventions underpinning both narrative fiction and historical writing (such as teleological continuity, causality and closure).

Given postmodernist historical fiction’s self-reflexiveness, or metafiction, Hutcheon calls it historiographic metafiction, but because self-referential literature goes back at least to Sterne’s *Tristam Shandy*, she stresses that “[s]pecificity of context is part of the ‘situating’ of postmodernism. In other words, postmodernism goes beyond self-reflexivity to situate discourse in a broader context,”[33] unlike canonical historiography, which, in its attempt to narrate the past events in such a way that they seem to narrate themselves, tends to suppress all references to the text’s conditions of production and reception, context and intent. On the contrary, postmodernism fiction, influenced by the relevant work of French theorists Barthes and Derrida, adopts a very different textual strategy, highlighting, rather than suppressing, the discursive situation.

The problematised rethinking of the nature of history and its writing can only be done if the past is looked upon with irony and critical detachment. For Umberto Eco, a postmodern theorist who doubles as a novelist (or vice versa), this is, in fact, the fundamental difference between modernism and postmodernism – the latter does not shun the past. It revisits it, instead, not innocently, but with irony:

> The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly,” because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.” At this point, having

> avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence.[34]

Julian Barne’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* (1963) and Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983) – to name but a few examples – adopt such an attitude towards the past and its writing. Eco’s own fiction exemplifies it quite well. As a novelist, he rose to international prominence with the publication of his best-selling novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980), a narrative work which illustrates quite clearly the eclecticism and multiplicity that characterise postmodernist fiction, by assembling together a variety of genres and modes whose combination can only be described as highly unusual by canonical standards: historical novel, detective story, gothic romance, chronicle and scholarly discourse. Intertextuality is obviously part of the artistic composition of *The Name of the Rose*. In its opening pages it reads like *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), or any other work written under the same genre, because it also uses the well-known gothic pretence that the text is a found manuscript of obscure, uncertain origin, but as we read on we realise that it is a highly complex work, one which couldn’t, therefore, be farther from the formulaic nature of the gothic novel. As Linda Hutcheon recurrently emphasises, this is the typically contradictory postmodern technique “of installing and then subverting familiar conventions.”[35] *The Name of the Rose* is by now a classic of postmodernist fiction, having been the object of academic study and simultaneously become a best-seller. The same could be affirmed of works like, say, John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume* (1985), novels whose contemporary narrators tell a story set in the past without any nostalgic view of the narrated historical context because it is revisited with critical distance, not with nostalgia.

It’s interesting to notice that the novelists mentioned above write in different languages, therefore coming from different literary traditions, and yet their works reveal common concerns and a shared willingness to challenge narrative conventions and common perceptions about the past and its representation. They seem to confirm the idea that postmodernism is primarily a European and American cultural phenomenon and, in this particular case, unlike in so many other circumstances, “America” does not simply mean “North America” but is, instead, intended to refer to the whole continent. Márquez is himself a Colombian novelist and many of his fellow South American writers have turned historical fiction into the dominant contemporary form in Latin American novels, as Seymour Menton argues in his study *Latin America's New Historical Novel*[36]. In their novels, magic realism is combined with postmodern concerns and textual devices to articulate the traumas and political and social tensions of societies which are still experiencing the debilitating effects of a long European and, more recently, American colonisation. Focusing on the past can be a very effective way of conveying eloquent messages about the present. It becomes, then, quite clear how the postmodern and the postcolonial discourses overlap in their revisionist attitude towards the past, making an attempt to reclaim forgotten histories, heal psychic scars, and search for and define cultural roots and identity.

The need to rewrite history as a means of shedding light on marginalised histories or as a healing process, to mend wounds and make up for past injustices and wrongdoings, arises from the fact that canonised history is fraught with defects that make it inevitably partial and omissive about whole groups of people whose voices and versions of the past have traditionally not been heard – they are the so-called losers of history. As explained above, they're the ones who have suffered, rather than made, history because official historiography has usually allotted them essentially passive roles in the historical process. Women, the lower classes, ethnic minorities and colonised peoples have been the groups more frequently cast in those roles. The current postmodern debate over these issues has urged Western historiography to re-examine its practices and analyse the reasons behind the marginalisation and exclusion of those groups. So, today, like in the past (as analysed in chapter one) reformulations in historical fiction are paralleled by developments in historiography. As Herb Wyile tells us,

> Writers of fiction, like their counterparts in the discipline of history, have increasingly occupied themselves with finding and telling the stories of those left out of traditional history. At the same time, however, many of those writers have become more aware of the interrelation between finding and telling that is such a preoccupation of current theorizing about historical discourse. (...) In the process of unearthing the untold or obscure stories of the past, or revisiting established stories, contemporary novelists are also contributing to an investigation of the process of historical representation – what history is and what it means to try to depict the past.[37]

By exposing the partisan nature of historical knowledge and drawing attention to the untold (hi)stories of marginalised groups, postmodern historical fiction abides by very different principles from the ones underlying the traditional historical novel, which in many cases, as Wesseling observes, "fostered nationalist sentiments by colourful, if not idealizing, depictions of the national past."[38] She also maintains that

> the complementary position [which the classical historical novel occupied] with respect to historiography is exchanged for a metahistorical one. Postmodernist writers do not consider it their task to propagate historical knowledge, but to enquire into the very possibility, nature, and use of historical knowledge from an epistemological or a political perspective.[39]

Therefore, in their works they try to compensate for the major defects of Western historiography: ethnocentrism, androcentrism, and imperialism. Writing marginalised groups into history is not an easy task, though, because, having been traditionally excluded from the official versions of the past, those groups have left no records behind. As correctly observed in Rushdie's *Shame* (1983),

> History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few marks [...]. History loves only those who dominate her: it is a relationship of mutual enslavement.[40]

Salman Rushdie is one of the novelists currently involved in the project of rewriting history and recovering the past of suppressed groups. This is also the ultimate goal of works such as Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1983), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), José Saramago's *O Memorial do Convento* (1982) or André Brink's *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993). (The fact that the latter is a South-African writer should warn us to take the assertion that postmodernism is a European and American phenomenon with reservations.) The list of works could go on and on. Even Terry Eagleton has made a foray into this type of historical fiction (a fact which has obviously been registered with irony by Linda Hutcheon[41]) with the publication of *Saints and Scholars* (1987), a novel focusing on the lives of the poor and working class people in Dublin. No-one doubts that Eagleton can hardly be described as a postmodernist, but that is precisely the reason why his example illustrates so well the pervasiveness of postmodernism's influence in contemporary culture – even those who do not share its principles and refute its theoretical basis end up coming under its influence. Indeed, nowadays many novelists are turning to historical fiction without seeing themselves as *postmodernist writers* – they consequently write fiction that may lack self-conscious, or metafictional, devices and eschew the ontological and epistemological questions that define, par excellence, postmodernist fiction, and yet it seems quite reasonable to trace the current revival of historical fiction to the postmodernist interest in history and its revisionist attitude towards the past. The anti-totalisation discourse of postmodernism – manifest in its critical evaluation of essentialist notions of truth, knowledge and power, its mistrust of metanarratives (Lyotard's *grands récits*) and privileging of "little narratives" (*pétits récits*) – obviously appeals to groups of people who have traditionally been oppressed in social systems dominated by patriarchal, imperialist ideologies. They may embrace postmodernism in all its complexity or they may adapt it (water it down, perhaps) to suit their specific purposes and agendas, but, even in this case, its influence will be there, nonetheless. Women, as mentioned above, are one of those groups and it becomes, therefore, important to analyse how the postmodernist and the feminist discourses interweave and how the current revival in historical fiction can be of assistance in the attempt to recover the hidden past of half of the world's population, a topic to which we will turn next.

Notes

1 Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995 (1989): p. 17.

2 Brian McHale. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994 (1987): pp. 3-4.

3 Alexandra Lavau. "Postmodernism." *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*. Ed. Lorna Sage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: p. 508 (italics added).

4 Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." 1988. *Modernism/Postmodernism*. Ed. Peter Brooker. London and New York: Longman. 1992: p. 179.

5 *Ibid*. p. 171.

6 *Ibid*. p. 167.

7 Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso, 1996 (1991): p. 287.

8 *Ibid*. p. 296.

9 *Ibid*. p. 4.

10 Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." p. 179.

11 Georg Lukács. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Trans. John and Necke Mander. London: Merlin Press, 1962: p. 26.

12 Peter Brooker. "Modernist Positions." *Modernism/Postmodernism*. p. 38.

13 Terry Eagleton. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997 (1996): p. viii.

14 *Ibid*. p. 26

15 *Ibid*. pp. 21-2.

16 *Ibid*. p. 31 (italics added).

17 *Ibid*. p. 23.

18 *Ibid*. p. 19.

19 *Ibid*. p. 30.

20 Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996 (1988): p. 23.

21 Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. p. 11.

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25 Arthur Danto. *Analytical Philosophy of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965: p. 101.

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27 Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975 (1973): p. 21.

28. *Ibid*. p. 27.

29 Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003 (1997): p. 34.

30 *Ibid*. p. 20.

31. Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. p. 399.

32 Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. p. 105.

33 *Ibid*. p. 41.

34. Umberto Eco. “Postmodernism, Irony, the Enjoyable.” 1985. Trans. William Weaver. *Modernism/Postmodernism*. p. 227.

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36 Seymour Menton. *Latin America’s New Historical Novel*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.

37 Herb Wyile. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002: p. 5.

38 Elisabeth Wesseling. *Writing History as a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel*. p. 50.

39 *Ibid*. p. 73.

40 Salman Rushdie. *Shame*. 1983. London: Vintage, 1995: p. 124.

41 Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. p. 59.

3. The retrieval of female voices

In Western society, it was not until women joined together in the suffrage movement, at the turn of the twentieth century, that they became a separate, identifiable social group. Their visibility in the public life of that period, particularly in Britain, was raised thanks to a vigorous campaign of demonstrations and militant action intending to push forward an agenda of their own. The fight for equality with men in voting rights clearly showed women's agency at a time when an oppressive patriarchal order of things still upheld the notion of separate spheres for men and women: the public sphere belonged to the first while the private sphere of domestic life was assigned to the latter. The so-called suffragettes' efforts to change the subordinate status of women and advance their situation in society clearly challenged the sexist values cherished by patriarchy and the term "suffragettes" itself is highly indicative of the derogatory and hostile attitude with which their fight was met. Because numerous writings and publications produced by the women involved in the movement were published at the time and had a considerable circulation, it's possible for us today to have access to first-hand accounts of the struggle for the vote (which, then, inevitably led to a struggle for education, for jobs, and professional training). As Jane Marcus tells us, "[a]t the height of the suffrage movement in 1911 there were 21 regular feminist periodicals in England, a women's press, a feminist bookshop, the Fawcett Library and a bank run by and for women."[1] Records are absolutely essential to write disenfranchised and marginalised groups into history, as emphasised in the previous chapter. Due to their agency and prolific writings, women involved in the suffrage movement made sure that their struggle would be properly documented, thus leaving textual remains behind which, later on, became extremely important resources available for those wanting to study the movement as well as the lives and (hi)stories of the women who joined it. The suffrage movement produced, as Marcus puts it, "a spate of histories of women."[2]

Women were among the social groups systematically excluded and marginalised by traditional historiography, whose focus was instead put on the lives and achievements of the so-called great men. Throughout the ages there were, of course, women who *made their way* into history – one can immediately think of world-famous examples like Cleopatra, Joan of Arc (who was taken as an icon by the suffragists), or Catherine the Great – but they are only the exceptions that confirm the rule: traditional historiography made no room for women's lives and experiences. The consequences of the social restrictions imposed on women by the patriarchy were, thus, doubly perverse. On the one hand, they obviously constituted serious infringements on free choice and self-determination by confining women to the roles of wives and mothers; on the other hand, because the skills and everyday life practices associated with such roles were undervalued by the same patriarchy that established that those were female tasks, women's position in society was inevitably one that lacked authority, influence and power. These discriminatory social practices turned women into political nonentities and kept them out of the historical record, while simultaneously confirming and emphasising the notion of history as an exclusively male preserve.

However, as scholars stress on their studies on the topic, the writing of history underwent major changes throughout the twentieth century, particularly over its last decades, as a result of a series of political and cultural transformations which made it impossible for historiography to remain unchanged. Historians were, thus, forced to re-examine the traditional historical methodology and practice, gaining insights from the theoretical work and discussions carried out in areas such as feminism and postmodernism, as mentioned in chapter two, with the immediate result that historiography broadened its boundaries to include new areas of study and research. In the opening chapter of *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Peter Burke writes:

> In the last generation or so, the universe of historians has been expanding at a dizzying rate. National history, which was dominant in the nineteenth century, now has to compete for attention with world history and with local history (once left to antiquarians and amateurs). There are many new fields, often supported by specialized journals. Social history, for example, became independent of economic history only to fragment, like some new nation into "historical demography," "labour history," "urban history," and so on.[3]

The radical changes in our understanding of history and in the way it is written have led historians to coin new phrases to describe this completely different approach to historical enquiry and its areas of research. "New history" and "total history" are two of them, which Burke defines as follows:

> The new history is history written in deliberate reaction against the traditional "paradigm," that useful if imprecise term put into circulation by the American historian of science Thomas Kuhn. It will be convenient to describe this traditional paradigm as "Rankean history," after the great German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), although he was less confined by it than his followers were [...].
>
> (...)
>
> The new history, on the other hand, has come to be concerned with virtually every human activity. "Everything has a history," as the scientist J.B.S. Haldane once wrote [in a work with that precise

> title, published in 1951]; that is, everything has a past which can in principle be reconstructed and related to the rest of the past. Hence the slogan "total history," so dear to the *Annales* historians. In the last thirty years we have seen a number of remarkable histories of topics which had not previously been thought to possess a history.[4]

Peter Burke then goes on to draw up a (long) list of topics previously excluded from history which are now the object of historical research. While the traditional paradigm of historical writing privileged an elite formed by those holding political, military and economic power, thus offering a view from above, "a number of the new historians are concerned with 'history from below,' in other words with the views of ordinary people and with their experience of social change."[5] The phrase "ordinary people" is a quite large umbrella which includes individuals from very different groups, obviously having different backgrounds, life experiences, and different histories. It was only recently, then, that those histories have started to be studied and written down by scholars and historians who met considerable resistance when they first ventured into these new areas of research, as Burke points out: "In the 1950s, when a British historian wrote a thesis about a popular movement in the French Revolution, one of his examiners asked him, 'Why do you bother with these bandits?'"[6]

As far as women's history is concerned, its emergence as a definable field of enquiry accompanied the feminist campaigns for improvements in women's social and professional status, and in its early days its focus was put on the search for female inspirational role models, attributing women's oppression and lack of historical visibility to male bias. On a second phase, the study of examples of extraordinary women from the past gradually gave way to a broader enquiry into women's lives, as Joan W. Scott explains:

> In one of the conventional narratives of the origins of this field [women's history], feminist politics are the starting-point. These accounts locate the origin of the field in the 1960s, when feminist activists called for a history that would provide heroines, proof of women's agency, and explanations of oppression and inspiration for action. Academic feminists are said to have responded to the call of "herstory" by directing their scholarship to a larger political agenda; there was a direct connection between politics and scholarship in the early days. Later – sometime in the mid- to late seventies – the account continues, women's history moved away from politics. It enlarged its field of questions by documenting all aspects of the lives of women in the past and so acquired a momentum of its own.[7]

The retrieval of female voices thus became a common goal for the feminist movement and for women's history as a separate field of study. The past was scrutinised in a determined effort to restore women their history – although ignored by canonical historiography, it had existed all along. Integrating women into history, therefore, meant *rewriting* it, a process which involved the recuperation of women’s past. Taking on the challenge, historians of women made it their priority to “point to the reality of women’s lived experience, and assume its inherent interest and importance. They located women in political organisations and at workplaces, and introduced new areas and institutions – families and households – as worthy of study.”[8] Granting women status as historical subjects was a substantial contribution to the discourse of collective identity that gave women’s movement its strength and social relevance, strongly reinforcing in the 1960s and 70s the struggle for women’s liberation and rights taken up much earlier with the fight for the vote. It was this context of detailed analysis of women’s roles, experiences and achievements in different historical moments that made it possible to rediscover female voices and rescue remarkable (hi)stories from oblivion.

Had it not been for the two World Wars, the campaign for women’s rights would have probably made more headway by the 1960s, but the devastating effects of those conflicts took a heavy toll on the women’s movement. As Jane Marcus puts it, “World War I in fact wiped out women’s culture,”[9] by bringing to a stop a movement which was in full swing by 1914. Further on in her essay, Marcus writes that “[i]n women’s history, the pre-war cultural achievements of women in politics and art reached a high point from 1906-1914."[10] As Europe was ravaged by war, women suspended the movement’s activities and spent that period actively involved in the war effort but, once it was over and men returned home, they were dispossessed of their jobs, therefore being worse off economically after the war than in 1914, as some feminist critics stress. Besides, although women were enfranchised in 1918 or shortly afterwards in most of the countries which had fought in the war, the right to vote was subject to restrictions in some of those countries, such as Britain, where, as Marcus reminds us “women did not get the vote until 1928; in 1918 only women over 30 with the property qualifications got votes.”[11] Breaking with the past, in 1914-18 women had taken over men’s jobs and risked their lives as nurses and ambulance drivers at the front, thereby making an important contribution to the war effort. However, by 1919 it was clear that, although headway had been made, the service women had done to their country was not duly rewarded. The agency and resourcefulness they had displayed during the war had not furthered their cause as much as they wished and, thus, there were still many important battles ahead to be fought. Twenty years later, concerned with the rise of militarism and fascism in Europe, Virginia Woolf would actually argue in *Three Guineas*

(1938) that a woman’s attitude towards war could only be one of indifference, given her status as an outsider for whom it was not possible to identify with the national interest men fought for:

> But the outsider will make it her duty not merely to base her indifference upon instinct, but upon reason. When he [her brother] says, as history proves that he has said, and may say again “I am fighting to protect our country” and thus seeks to rouse her patriotic emotion, she will ask herself, “What does ‘our country’ mean to an outsider?” To decide this she will analyse the meaning of patriotism in her own case. She will inform herself of the position of her sex and her class in the past. She will inform herself of the amount of land, wealth and property in the possession of her own sex and class in the present – how much of “England” in fact belongs to her. From that same sources she will inform herself of the legal protection which the law has given her in the past and now gives her.
>
> (...)
>
> She will find that she has no good reason to ask her brother to fight on her behalf to protect “our” country. “’Our country,’” she will say, “throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions.”[12]

Woolf’s writings on the topic of women’s subservient status are remarkably eloquent, lucid and incisive and although she, at times, shows a certain ambivalence towards feminism, and even an outright rejection of the term (having described feminism as a “vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete”[13]) both *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) are feminist polemics still regarded nowadays as penetrating critiques of the straight-jacketing rules imposed on women by patriarchy. There have also been less appreciative assessments of Woolf’s contribution to feminism – such as the ones made by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977) – but on the whole, her works on women have been read in a quite different light, as Laura Marcus observes:

> Renewed critical attention to these texts [*A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*] – and to Woolf’s numerous essays on women writers and on women’s position in society more generally – has created a Virginia Woolf whose feminism cannot be in doubt, and which is, indeed, at the very heart of her concerns.[14]

Although in *A Room of One’s Own* Virginia Woolf specifically argues the case for women writers, she does consider the situation of women in general, stressing that their lives and experiences have not been properly valued and documented throughout the times. “History scarcely mentions her,”[15] Woolf writes, expressing her disappointment at the lack of facts kept on record about the woman of the past.

This same frustration would again be powerfully articulated in 1949 by Simone de Beauvoir in her comprehensive treatise on women *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*), widely regarded as the first major twentieth-century work of liberal feminist thought. Her famous statement that one is not born but rather becomes a woman encapsulates one of her most important contributions to feminist thought, namely the separation of "woman," as a biological entity, from "femininity," as a social construction. Borrowing the binary Self (Subject)/Other (Object) from existentialist philosophy, *The Second Sex* tries to account for the existential othering of women, arguing that they exist only as they are conceived of by men and have, therefore, no existence in their own right. The Other is not an equal complement to the Self/Subject, rather serving as a projection of everything the Self/Subject rejects: immanence, passivity, voicelessness. That is precisely the status men attach to women:

> Or, ce qui définit d'une manière singulière la situation de la femme, c'est que, étant comme tout être humain, une liberté autonome, elle se découvre et se choisit dans un monde où les hommes lui imposent de s'assumer comme l'Autre: on prétend la figer en object et la vouer à l'immanence puisque sa transcendence sera perpétuellement transcendée par une autre conscience essentielle et souveraine. Le drame de la femme, c'est ce conflit entre la revendication fondamentale de tout sujet qui se pose toujours comme l'essentiel et les exigences d'une situation qui la constitue comme inessentielle.[16]

Earlier on in the book, Simone de Beauvoir had stated:

> L'humanité est mâle et l'homme définit la femme non en soi mais relativement à lui; elle n'est pas considerée comme un être autonome. (...) Elle se détermine et se différencie par rapport à l'homme et non celui-ci par rapport à elle; elle est l'inessentiel en face de l'essentiel. Il est le Sujet, il est l'Absolut: elle est l'Autre.[17]

De Beauvoir finds certain similarities between the oppression of women and that of other social groups such as African Americans or Jews, also treated as objects by the ruling patriarchy. However, unlike those groups, women have never been a minority and they've always lived side by side with their oppressors: "ils ont en commun un passé, une tradition, parfois une religion, une culture."[18] Simone de Beauvoir goes on to argue that this has been the reason why women have been unable to overcome social impositions, collectively defy their oppressors and cast themselves as historical subjects:

> Les prolétaires disent "nous". Les Noirs aussi. Se posent comme sujets ils changent en "autres" les bourgeois, les Blancs. Les femmes – sauf en certains congrès qui restent des manifestations abstraites – ne disent pas "nous" [...].
>
> (...)
>
> Elles vivent dispersées parmi les hommes, rattachées par l'habitat, le travail, les intérêts économiques, la condition sociale à certaines hommes – père ou mari – plus étroitement qu'aux autres femmes. Bourgeoises elles sont solidaires des bourgeois et non des femmes proletaires; blanches des hommes blancs et non des femmes noires. (...) Le lien qui l[la femme]'unit à ses oppresseurs n'est comparable à aucun autre.[19]

Written several years before the establishment of women's history as a field of study, *The Second Sex* convincingly presents women as collectively deprived of historical subjectivity, a status denied them by a patriarchal society which granted it exclusively to men. When, years later, historians of women set out on a quest to restore the interpreted past of half of the world's population, their task proved to be quite demanding because, as Hilda L. Smith puts it, "women as a whole had been omitted from the past; thus women did not need to be included simply 'from the bottom up,' but from all social standings."[20] In an essay entitled "Ambiguity and alienation in *The Second Sex*," Toril Moi sums up Simone de Beauvoir's powerful argument quite successfully:

> The specificity of women's oppression consists precisely in the absence of a female collectivity capable of perceiving itself as a historical subject opposed to other social groups. This is why no other oppressed group experiences the same kind of contradiction between freedom and alienation.[21]

The primary reason why *The Second Sex* still gets so much critical attention nowadays is that not only was it a groundbreaking work when it was first published in 1949, but also because its fundamental ideas and arguments still keep a remarkable currency. When, for instance, Simone de Beauvoir draws attention to the fact that women are spread across all social classes, which makes it easier for them to establish solidarity ties with men belonging to the same class, rather than with women from other classes or ethnic groups, she is in fact anticipating the gender-scepticism underlying the work carried out by some contemporary feminist critics who have cast serious doubts on the use of gender as an analytical category. The opening paragraph of Susan Bordo's essay "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism" introduces the topic quite clearly:

> Recently, I heard a feminist historian claim that there were absolutely no common areas of experience between the wife of a plantation owner in the pre-Civil War South and the female slaves her husband owned. Gender, she argued, is so thoroughly fragmented by race, class, historical particularity, and individual difference, as to self-destruct as an analytical category. The "bonds of womanhood," she insisted, is a feminist fantasy, born out of the ethnocentrism of white, middle-class academics.[22]

This same idea is straightforwardly expressed in the work of Judith Butler:

> If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.[23]

Gender theory had its heyday in the '70s, when feminism devoted a sustained effort to the work of exposing and articulating the gendered nature of history and culture. More recently, however, its practice and assumptions have been challenged by a strain of feminist thought which criticises the work of gender theorists (like Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, and Carol Gilligan) for its binary construction of reality. According to this other feminist standpoint, gender theory is clearly essentialist and totalising, as it relies on oversimplified, reductionist generalisations and lacks racial, class, sexual, and ethnic awareness. Feminist scholars like Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson therefore analogise it to the metanarratives postmodernism has worked to dismantle, finding fault with its "presumption of an overly grandiose and totalising conception of theory. Theory was understood [in the '70s] as the search for the one key factor which would explain sexism cross-culturally and illuminate all social life. In this sense, to theorise was by definition to produce a quasi-metanarrative."[24] They deplore that "[e]ven in this [contemporary] phase, however, traces of youthful quasi-metanarratives remain. Some theorists who have ceased looking for *the* causes of sexism still rely on essentialist categories such as gender theory."[25] Fraser and Nicholson's argumentation is informed with an enthusiasm for postmodern theory – plainly stating that "[b]y criticizing lingering essentialism in contemporary feminist theory, we hope to encourage such theory to become more consistently postmodern"[26] – which is far from unanimous in contemporary feminism. Although both feminism and postmodernism are usually described as discourses from the margins which overlap in their determination to interrogate and challenge the authority repressively exerted by the centre of political and cultural power over the periphery, the relations between them have proved to be ambivalent and even problematic, as Alexandra Lavau explains:

> The benefits of a postmodern poetics which throws into question totalizing discourses which perpetuate stereotypes of women are manifold for feminism. This non-hierarchical approach, favouring a multiplicity of voices and decentring the knowing masculine subject, can be positively employed by women writers concerned with dismantling a system of representation that has long essentialized sexual difference, fixing "woman" as the passive object of discourse.
>
> But the feminist intersection with postmodernism is not without vicissitudes. Postmodernism valorizes a fragmented subject with no authoritative speaking position, the deferral of meaning and the constructedness of all discourses. However, women who have struggled for a voice and political agency cannot uncritically embrace a discourse which eschews coherent positions.[27]

Given such ambivalence – and because feminism is a markedly plural enterprise – contemporary feminist critics' assessment of postmodernism vary widely, which has fueled an intense theoretical debate whose participants tend to either argue for a greater influence of postmodernism on feminist theory or warn against the threats it poses. The group who opposes the idea that feminism may seriously undermine its goals and projects if it assimilates the postmodern influence include, apart from Fraser and Nicholson, academics like Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke, who don't think, on the one hand, that feminism should embrace postmodernism unquestioningly, but, on the other hand, find close affinities between the two discourses. In their opinion, both of them are "porous, capacious; equally they are discourses on the move, ready to leap over borders and confound boundaries."[28] Jane Flax also sees significant agreements between contemporary feminist and postmodern theories and practices, asserting that "despite an understandable attraction to the (apparently) logical, orderly world of the Enlightenment, feminist theory more properly belongs in the terrain of postmodern philosophy."[29] This rebellion against the principles of order, reason and rationality underpinning modernity is also a very distinctive feature of the work produced by eminent contemporary French feminists who, profoundly influenced by Simone de Beauvoir, have extensively addressed the concerns raised in *The Second Sex*, proclaiming that the liberation of women from patriarchal oppression can only be achieved if the enslaving binary Self/Other is abolished. The contributions of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva have been particularly relevant and, at the risk of oversimplifying their rich, complex work, their writings can be said to present the feminine as multiple, fluid, non-hierarchical and, therefore, unrepresentable by masculine metaphysics. Partly drawing on the work of deconstructive philosopher Jacques Derrida and post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (although Irigaray has made vigorous criticisms of certain elements in their theories), they focused on the notion of sexual difference, establishing that it is absolutely imperative that women explore their own sexuality in order to be able to represent women otherwise than as the negative other of the masculine. Cixous famously devised the concept of *écriture féminine*, a feminine writing practice opposed to *literatur* (the canonised masculine writing), presented as a privileged means of disrupting the phallocentrism and logocentrism of the dominant cultural discourse. As Cixous tells us, "Il est impossible de définir une pratique féminine de l'écriture, car on ne pourra jamais théoriser cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifique qu'elle n'existe pas. Mais elle excèdera toujours le discours qui régit le système phallocentrique."[30] *Écriture féminine* must, therefore, occur outside the phallocentric order and escape the boundaries of reason and logic so as to deconstruct and reinvent patriarchal discourse. The concept was then taken up and revised by Julia Kriteva and Luce Irigaray, who reaffirmed *écriture féminine*'s association with a disruption of logic, stable structures and meanings. The Anglophone feminist theory – which was responsible for the adoption of the category "French feminism" in the 1980s – has given considerable critical attention to the work carried out by these theorists, assimilating their influence and incorporating views and perspectives into the debate on the relations between feminism and postmodernism, as pointed out by Eleanor Pontoriero: "There have been an appropriation of, and response to Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous within the Anglo-American sphere which has broadened the term 'postmodern feminism'"[31] It is interesting to notice that their work has sometimes been the object of rather diverse readings and interpretations. For instance, Judith Butler clearly puts Luce Irigaray on the side of the postmodern feminists, highlighting her rebellion against notions of hiearchy, order, and domination associated with the masculine and the consequent rejection of the category of "subject:"

> Elaborating on Lacanian theory, but making significant departures from its presumptions of universal patriarchy, Luce Irigaray maintains that the very construct of an autonomous subject is a masculine cultural prerogative from which women have been excluded. She further claims that the subject is always already masculine, that it bespeaks a refusal of dependency required of male acculturation, understood originally as dependency on the mother, and that its "autonomy" is founded on a repression of its early and true helplessness, need, sexual desire for the mother, even identification with the maternal body. The subject becomes a fantasy of autogenesis, the refusal of maternal foundations and, in generalized form, a repudiation of the feminine. For Irigaray, then, it would make no sense to refer to a female subject or to women as subjects, for it is precisely the construct of the subject that necessitates relations of hierarchy, exclusion, and domination. In a word, there can be no subject without an Other.[32]

Sandra Harding, for her part, places Luce Irigaray on the other side of the theoretical fence, analogising her views on postmodernism to the ones held by the feminist theorists who have persistently expressed their wariness of the anti-Enlightenment criticism.[33] Nancy Hartsock is one of them. In her writings she voices her concern about the impact of postmodern theory on feminism because, in her opinion, its tendency towards provisionality and fragmentation hinders, rather than helps, the empowerment of women, or of any other marginalised group. She vigorously asserts that "postmodernism represents a dangerous approach for any marginalised group to adopt"[34] and raises doubts about the real reasons behind the postmodern problematising of the concept of subjecthood at a time when the marginalised voices that had always been kept silent are beginning to be retrieved and make themselves heard:[35]

> Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of

> subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorized. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect.[36]

However, yet again, it's possible to approach this topic from a different angle, as illustrated in *The Politics of Postmodernism* by Linda Hutcheon, for whom feminism (or rather "feminisms," as she puts it, given the multiplicity of points of view coexisting in the feminist enterprise) and postmodernism, "however related must be kept separate."[37]

As a result, challenging the views of theorists who see the two discourses' common interest in representation as reason enough to argue for the conflation of the two cultural enterprises, Hutcheon maintains that such a conflation is simply not possible. As she explains,

> there is a major difference of orientation between the two that cannot be ignored: we have seen that postmodernism is politically ambivalent for it is doubly coded – both complicitous with and contesting the cultural dominants within which it operates; but on the other side, feminisms have distinct, unambiguous political agendas of resistance. Feminisms are not really either compatible with or even an example of postmodern thought, as a few critics have tried to argue[...].[38]

For Linda Hutcheon, then, postmodernism is not apolitical, but she nonetheless presents it as lacking the political agency and the desire to change social practices that feminism displays. She, therefore, concludes that "[f]eminisms will continue to resist incorporation into postmodernism, largely because of their revolutionary force as political movements working for real social change."[39] Furthermore, Hutcheon argues that, rather than being subsumed under the postmodern enterprise, feminist practices have had a major impact on postmodernism: "feminisms have pushed postmodern theory and art in directions they might not otherwise have headed. One of these directions (...) [is] that of history."[40] By firmly stating that the postmodern focus on historicity is rooted in feminist theory and practices, Hutcheon grants feminism the status of major influence on postmodernism, since, as she recurrently emphasises, that focus has become one of the hallmarks of postmodern art in general, and literature makes it quite clear. It is, indeed, the distinctive feature of historiographic metafiction (postmodern writing's most emblematic genre), as discussed in the previous chapter. She supports her claim in the evidence provided by the works of several practitioners of this type of fiction, making a special reference to Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1976) and Christa Wolf's *Patterns of Childhood* (1980), which she presents as works that are both feminist and postmodern in the way they centre on historical narrative representation, rethinking the traditional separation between private and public history. Such interweaving of the private and the public is put at the service of the retrieval of women's voices and histories, a task many other women writers have assigned themselves over the last few decades, as clearly exemplified by the work of novelists like Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala or Jeanette Winterson, all of whom influential authors of contemporary fiction in English whose novels have won wide acclaim. Each one of them, as well as many others who have taken a similar literary path, assimilates and combines in her unique way a variety of feminist, postmodern, and, in many cases, postcolonial influences, producing works that focus on women's experiences, their outlook on life and on their role and agency in a past unrecorded in official documents. The goal these novelists have set themselves is, thus, quite similar to the one pursued by historians of women: although working in different fields, they all share the same desire to restore women their past and history, thereby making both discourses – fiction and historiography – serve a common cause.

It should be stressed at this point that, while history traditionally marginalised and excluded women, literature has long been offering them the fulfilment and satisfaction they were denied in so many aspects of social and political life. In fact, women took to writing long before they acquired the status of identifiable social group since that form of utterance enabled them to find their own voice, express female self-awareness, and somehow make up for the lack of opportunities and challenges available for them in society. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf emphasises a further motivation – the financial one:

> The extreme activity of mind which showed itself in the later eighteenth century among women – the talking and the meeting, the writing of essays on Shakespeare, the translating of the classics – was founded on the solid fact that women could make money by writing. Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for. (...) Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write.[41]

Writing was, to a certain extent, a subversive activity, but one which women could – or rather *had to* – carry out at home and which was, in most cases, largely dismissed by their families, which impacted negatively on the circumstances in which women wrote. Commenting on these limitations, Woolf observes further on in her book-length essay: "If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the sitting-room. And, as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain – 'women never have an half hour ... that they can call their own' – she was always interrupted."[42] Woolf goes on to remind us that "Jane Austen wrote like that to the end of her days."[43] One should, then, marvel at the fact that, faced with such adverse circumstances, excluded from education and confined to extremely narrow lives, some of those women would actually be able to write works that secured them a prominent position in the literary scene of their day, becoming great classics generations later. Obviously, for each one of them who reached this superior status, dozens of others faded into oblivion, although some were eventually rescued from such fate mainly by feminist scholars like Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, or Susan Gubar, who in the wake of second-wave feminism have extensively analysed the literary works produced by English women writers, tracing a distinctive female tradition.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that very few national literatures can be described as predominantly female, especially in their early periods. In the Anglo-Saxon world, Canadian literature is one of the few notable exceptions – if not the only one – to the rule of male predominance, as it has been clearly dominated by women right from its early days. This fact has been abundantly examined and commented on by literary critics who have expressed their views and made interesting interpretations. Lauren Rabnovitz, for instance, finds a close affinity between the history of Canada and the history of women: "Canada's history as a land raped and colonised by England and by the U.S. parallels women's history of oppression."[44] So does Coral Ann Howells:

> There are close parallels between the historical situation of women and of Canada as a nation, for women's experience of the power politics of gender and their problematic relation to patriarchal traditions of authority have affinities with Canada's attitude to the cultural imperialism of the United States as well as its ambivalence towards its European inheritance.[45]

For both critics, these interesting affinities explain women's especial adequacy for chronicling the Canadian experience and their consequent dominance in Canada's literary history. This is not to say that male writers in Canada have been absent, but it is surely beyond dispute that English-Canadian literature is remarkable for the number and prominence of its women writers. Today, like in the past, both Canadian-born and immigrant female authors are making their contribution to a rich literary tradition which has made ample room for female voices, allowing them to be properly heard. As Howells observes,

> Canadian women writers have literary mothers of their own. Contemporary women's writing in Canada is the culmination of a strong feminine literary tradition and one of which modern writers are very conscious as reassuring evidence of their creative origins in their own country.[46]

Margaret Atwood, widely regarded as the best-known and most influential contemporary Canadian author, provides us with a clear example of this vivid sense of literary inheritance. Back in 1970, when she was in the early stage of her successful career, Atwood chose Susanna Moodie – the English pioneer who chronicled her immigrant experience in the Canadian wilderness in writings such as *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), a work that has become a Canadian literary classic – as the subject for a poetic meditation on nature, alienation, and one's sense of place: *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*.

It would be reductionist to assert that the theme of feminine identity runs through all writings by Canadian female authors, but in many cases it is, indeed, the object of their focus. Their works very consistently deal with the realm of the feminine, showing a keen interest in the representation of women. The work of Jane Urquhart illustrates this feminist awareness. Like Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, or Ann Michaels, she began her literary career as a poet, and later moved into novel-writing. Her poetry includes *I'm Walking in the Garden of His Imaginary Palace* (1982), *False Shuffles* (1982), and *The Little Flowers of Madame de Montespan* (1983). Urquhart has also published a collection of short fiction – *Storm Glass* (1987) – but the five novels she's written so far are the works that have earned her both national and international acclaim: *The Whirlpool* (1986), which received *Le prix du meilleur livre étranger* (Best Foreign Book Award) in France; *Changing Heaven* (1990); *Away* (1993), which won the Trillium Award and was a finalist for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award; *The Underpainter* (1997), which won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the Rogers Communications Writers' Trust Fiction Prize; and *The Stone Carvers* (2001), a finalist for the 2001 Giller Prize. In part II, three of these novels will be the object of close analysis: *The Whirlpool*, *Away*, and *The Stone Carvers*, all of them historical novels that offer an interesting blend of private stories and officially recorded historical events, myth and history, fantasy and realism. Those narratives tend to foreground individuals who fit Linda Hutcheon's category "ex-centrics," i.e. people from the margins who are usually excluded from official historiography: immigrants, workers, and women. The latter group has a particularly strong visibility in Urquhart's fiction. In fact, in the novels under analysis, the cast of characters is dominated by women who fail to conform to the prevailing ideals of femininity of their day, by rejecting conventions and taking unusual decisions or options, thus subverting traditional notions and definitions of womanhood. In the three novels on which part II will focus, Urquhart explores their daily lives, physical experiences, personal tragedies, inner landscapes and conflicts in her signature lyrical style and fascination with the Canadian landscape and history. Hers are narratives set against the backdrop of historical periods and events – whether it is nineteenth-century Niagara Falls (*The Whirlpool*), the plight of Irish immigrants in Canada in the nineteenth century (*Away*), or the personal tragedies and traumas brought about by World War I (*The Stone Carvers*) – which often brush chronological linearity aside, thus conveying the unruly flow of memories. None of Urquhart's novels fits the category historiographic metafiction because, although they share postmodernism's interest in history and willingness to tell it from the point of view of those who have usually been kept silent and excluded from the official versions of history, they lack the metafictional devices and the ontological and epistemological doubt that characterise postmodern fiction. Parody, one of its other hallmarks, is equally absent. Urquhart's work is, then, part of a broader revival of historical fiction which has benefited from the contributions of several authors writing in different languages and styles, coming from different literary traditions and focusing on different places, historical periods and subjects. It is a particularly suitable genre to chronicle the localities and actualities of women's lives and in so doing to uncover their often obscured or buried histories. As mentioned above, such retrieval of female voices is the clear self-imposed task of an increasing number of authors across the entire literary world. Urquhart is one of them and she has pursued this goal very systematic and recurrently. Her historical novels are not a mere foray into a different field – they make up the whole body of her longer fiction. In fact, all her work (including her poetry) is permeated by this interest in the past and in woman-centred family histories, which her novels explore in her very own distinctive style, combining evocative imagery and classic realist conventions. There are, then, plenty of reasons why her works deserve to be the focus of comprehensive critical analysis, an enterprise to which part II will hopefully make a contribution.

Notes

1 Jane Marcus. “The Asylums of Antaeus. Women, War and Madness: Is There a Feminist Fetishism?” *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*. Eds. Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989: pp. 54-5.

2 *Ibid*. p. 56.

3 Peter Burke. “Overture. The New History: Its Past and its Future.” *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Ed. Peter Burke. London: Polity Press, 2001 (second edition): p.1.

4 *Ibid*. pp. 2-3.

5 *Ibid*. p. 4.

6 *Ibid*. [the question is quoted from R. Cobb. *The Police and the People* (Oxford, 1970), p. 81].

7 Joan W. Scott. “Women’s History.” *Ibid*. pp. 43-4.

8 *Ibid*. p. 54.

9 Jane Marcus. “The Asylums of Antaeus. Women, War and Madness: Is There a Feminist Fetishism?” p. 54.

10 *Ibid*. p. 65.

11 *Ibid*. p. 55.

12 Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own*. 1929. / *Three Guineas*. 1938. Ed. Michèle Barret. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000 (1993): pp. 233-4.

13 *Ibid*. p. 227.

14 Laura Marcus. “Woolf’s Feminism and Feminism’s Woolf.” *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Eds. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: p. 217.

15 Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One’s Own / Three Guineas*. p. 41.

16 Simone de Beauvoir. *Le Deuxième Sexe* – vol. 1. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949: pp. 34-5.

17 *Ibid*. pp.15-6.

18 *Ibid*. p. 19.

19 *Ibid*. pp. 20-1.

20 Hilda L. Smith. “Regionalism, Feminism, and Class: The Development of a Feminist Historian.” *Voices of Women Historians: The Personal, the Political, the Professional*.

Eds. Eileen Boris and Nupur Chaudhuri. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999: p. 39.

21 Toril Moi. “Ambiguity and Alienation in *The Second Sex*.” *Feminism and Postmodernism*. Eds. Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994: p. 89.

22 Susan Bordo. “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism.” *Feminism/ Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda J. Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990: p. 133.

23 Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990: p. 3.

24. Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson. “Social Criticism, without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism.” *Feminism/Postmodernism*. p. 29.

25 *Ibid*. p32.

26 *Ibid*. pp. 33-4.

27 Alexandra Lavau. “Postmodernism.” *The Cambridge Guide to Women’s Writing in English*. Ed. Lorna Sage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: pp. 509-10.

28 Margaret Ferguson and Jennifer Wicke. “Introduction: Feminism and Postmodernism; or, The Way We Live Now.” *Feminism and Postmodernism*. p. 2.

29 Jane Flax. “Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory.” *Feminism/ Postmodernism*. p. 42.

30 Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune Née*. Paris: Union Générale d’Editions, 1975: p. 69 (accessed via the Internet at http://www.ditl.info/art/definition.php?term=294).

31 Eleanor Pontoriero. “Feminism and Postmodernism.” *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*. Eds. Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist. London: Routledge, 2000: p. 119.

32 Judith Butler. “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse.” *Feminism/Postmodernism*. p. 327.

33 Sandra Harding. “Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques.” *Ibid*. p. 85.

34 Nancy Hartsock. “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?” *Ibid*. p. 160.

35 Hartsock’s ideological alliance to feminist theorists like Patricia Waugh is only apparent. While the latter emphatically asserts that “feminism cannot sustain itself as an emancipatory movement unless it acknowledges its foundation in the discourses of modernity” (Patricia Waugh. “From Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and

Autonomy Theory." *Postmodernism: A Reader*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. London: Edward Arnold, 1994 (1992): p. 190.), Nancy Hartsock stresses that the Enlightenment paradigms and values underpinned a universalising theory that marginalised and excluded women as well as a number of other social groups.

36 Nancy Hartsock. "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" pp. 163-4.

37 Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995 (1989): 161.

38 *Ibid*. p. 142.

39 *Ibid*. p. 168.

40 *Ibid*. p. 160.

41 Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own*. / *Three Guineas*. p. 59.

42 *Ibid*. p. 60.

43 *Ibid*.

44 Lauren Rabinovitz. "Issues of Feminist Aesthetics: Judy Chicago and Joyce Wiland" (1980). Quoted in Chantal Zabus. "Prospero's Progeny Curses Back: Postcolonial, Postmodern, and Postpatriarchal Rewritings of *The Tempest*." *Liminal Postmodernisms*: *The Postmodern, the (Post–)Colonial, and the (Post–)Feminist*. Eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994: p. 119.

45. Coral Ann Howells. *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*. London and New York: Methuen, 1987: p. 2.

46 *Ibid*. p. 21.

II

Close analysis of three novels by Jane Urquhart:

***The Whirlpool* (1986)**
***Away* (1993)**
***The Stone Carvers* (2001)**

1. *The Whirlpool* – A Tale of Female Quest for Selfhood

The first chapters of *The Whirlpool* could hardly be any clearer about Urquhart's intention to address the situation of women in nineteenth-century Canada, and the correlative topic of gender roles, in her debut novel. After a prologue set in Venice in December 1889 – featuring Robert Browning travelling about by gondola, immersed in thoughts ranging from his absolute certainty over the imminence of his death to his abandoned daydream to buy and restore a forlorn old Venetian palazzo[1] – the first two chapters, set six months earlier in the Canadian side of the Niagara Falls, introduce the leading female characters in the novel (Maud and Fleda), each one facing the day (7 June 1889) as the beginning of a new cycle in their lives. For Maud, whose husband and parents-in-law had died two years before, this was her first day of half-mourning, while for Fleda this was the day she would leave the "dark rooms" in Kick's Hotel behind, going back to the woods above a whirlpool in the Falls where she had last been in September. These two women strike readers as very different from each other, leading lives which appear to have very little – if anything at all – in common: Fleda is childless, Maud is the mother of a four-year-old boy, Fleda is married to a military historian, Maud is the undertaker's widow and, as the summer approaches, she can only expect to be very busy running the undertaking establishment as this is the season of crazy stunts and frequent river accidents, whereas Fleda, a daydreamer, is looking forward to spending the days reading English poetry (especially Browning's) in the woods where she and her husband will live "most of the time in a tent which he will borrow from the Camp at Niagara."[2] Maud's summer days will be filled by the rituals of death, while Fleda's will be spent surrounded by nature, which is celebrating "the advent of the blossom season" (23). Yet these women's lives will undergo, if not identical, at least parallel changes throughout the summer months, by the end of which they will have become different individuals, having in the process asserted their selfhood by breaking free from entrenched habits and social conventions and by refusing to let their lives be ruled by other people's standards and expectations.

The novel's first chapter takes us into Maud's world – a world primarily defined by death but also by routine, loneliness, and obedience to some of the stifling social conventions of Victorian Canada. Self-discipline and order rule her life, which in this particular aspect seems to parallel Robert Browning's, as described in the prologue: "[he had lived his life] with the regularity of a copy clerk. A time for everything, everything in its time" (4). Maud is presented not as the distraught, but rather the pragmatic black widow who took over the family business when her husband died in the prime of life. The comparison with the eponymous spider appears to be encouraged by the fact that in her husband's "short adulthood he had studied them [spiders] obsessively, collecting numbers of the species, recording their activities in a growing series of notebooks" (17). As this was often the topic of their evening discussions (and, occasionally, quarrels), Maud soon proved to be a fast learner and developed a particular interest in the black widow: "Maud secretly admired the black widow. She knew that the female ate the male after mating, which seemed only fair since there existed male spiders who actually wrapped females and tied them down before impregnating them" (78-9). Charles's untimely death was not brought on by any violent act performed by Maud – its cause was far more conventional, resulting from an epidemic which also killed his parents and many other townspeople – but, as made clear at several moments in the novel, it presented Maud with a unique opportunity for real growth and development, which she was denied while she was confined to the narrow role of dependent, passive wife that the society of her day assigned to women like herself. That restrictive role had very little to offer her beyond the listlessness of the days monotonously spent bending over needlework. Little wonder, then, that Maud felt uncomfortable with it, finding it unfulfilling, and suffering from its numbing effects:

> Six years before, when she was newly married, the periods of enforced quiet had disturbed Maud – times when she had sat dutifully over some senseless embroidery while downstairs mourners had recited measurements for coffins. It had been as if, in her own life, emotion had been held in suspense, so that the rest of the world could live and love and, more importantly, die. So the rest of them could respond while she worked garlands of flowers onto a piece of unbleached cotton and her young husband presided over the ritual in progress at the most recently bereaved household. She and her mother-in-law sitting there in the parlour, noiselessly drinking tea, waiting for a long thin line of mourners to appear in the graveyard outside the window; the signal that another funeral was finished, that the men would soon climb the stairs and life, as the women knew it then, would begin again. (34)

The emptiness of such a life turned women into inert, mute spectators of the world around them – it was as if they were watching a play in which men got all the roles, shutting women out of the performance. Under such circumstances, Charles's death gave Maud the chance to somehow break through the paralysing code of feminine passivity and entangled web of custom that constricted women's lives in the Victorian period, which enabled her to take control of her life. Up until then she couldn't even be analogised to an ordinary spider, let alone to a black widow, but rather to a powerless, tiny insect unable to break free from a tightly-spun cobweb; with her husband and grandparents gone, she would finally be allowed to tentatively begin her journey to selfhood. It was a chance firmly grabbed with both hands by Maud, who made the transformation from young wife to pragmatic businesswoman overnight – literally so. There was merely what can be perceived as a very lonely rite of passage taking place in the dead of night, after Charles and his parents passed away: "she began to play the piano – loudly, fiercely. By four in the morning she had exhausted her entire repertoire – all of the Canadian Hymnal and the few pieces of classical music she had learned as a girl" (20). Maud's limited repertoire seems to symbolise her own limited life experience and, as she plays and replays it, she appears to be saying goodbye to her old self in order to take on a new one by dawn: "At six A.M., after playing the hymn 'Unto the Hills' for the ninth time, Maud abruptly left the piano, washed her face, ran a comb hastily through her hair, and descended the staircase that led to the world" (20). She was suddenly posed a major challenge and rose to the occasion by taking on her husband's role, swiftly becoming the pragmatic employer who realised the need to make sure that her employees would retain their positions, thus guaranteeing the business' survival. "She intended to survive" (20) as well, a determination which clearly signals her newly-found inner strength and resourcefulness.

Not all social impositions and conventions were easily discarded, though, as Maud's (initially) nearly obsessive compliance with the strict mourning dress code shows:

> In Niagara Falls, Canada, the undertaker's widow, Maud Grady, was forced to wrap herself in real Courtauld crape. No cheap, comfortable imitations for her; she felt duty-bound to set an example. The perfect symbol of animate deep mourning, she wore crimped crape for two full years, adding, when the first few months had passed, some jet beads and a small amount of fringe to her costume. Much of her average day was spent organizing the paraphernalia of bereavement: black parasol, black stockings, underwear edged in black ribbon, black-framed stationery, black ink making black words, black sealing wax, black veil, black bonnet tied under the chin in a menacing black bow. (15-6).

Due to Maud's firm decision to wear nothing but crape, the colour of bereavement was soon imprinted on her skin, as the fabric left black stains on her body which she vainly tried to remove with harmful chemicals, eventually giving up such attempts altogether. Wearing crape thus became a symbolic act of self-punishment somewhat reminiscent of the way penitents and ascetics, centuries before, would wear a hair shirt to expiate their sins. This heavy burden was placed on women alone, as men were socially exempt from following such rigid dress code. Like in so many other respects, the principle of the double standard was so deep-seated in people's minds that Maud, who was otherwise ready and eager to welcome change into her life, fully accepted and obeyed what the contemporary society prescribed for widows like herself, which meant that for two years, especially when she ventured outdoors, her movement was greatly hindered by her stiff clothes – she couldn't walk freely or move her head and the veil she wore led to a partial blindness that could have had very serious consequences:

> Crape was not made for strolling about in. It clung to her black-stockinged thighs (her petticoat was made of the same fabric), while the weepers stuck to the material around her shoulders, making it impossible to move her head. This, combined with the partial blindness caused by her veil, had led her, more than once, into the path of an ongoing streetcar or carriage. Had it not been for her acute sense of hearing she might have joined her husband in Drummond Hill Cemetery months ago. (22)

As the quotation above clearly shows, the clothes women were made to wear were impossibly restraining and Urquhart uses them in the novel as an apt metaphor for the severe social restraints imposed on women by the Victorian ideology. The contrast with what society expected from men couldn't be any starker: "Men never had this problem. The same black hat-band did well for each bereavement" (15). Even in dreams (which, as Freud explained us a hundred years ago, should not be regarded as purely fanciful and nonsensical, but rather as highly charged with meaning), this most unbearable restriction seems to haunt Maud, who timidly tries to make her husband share it with her, but his prompt dismissal of her gesture only adds to Maud's discomfort by identifying *her* – not *him* – as the one socially required to observe such a crippling convention:

> [In Maud's dreams, Charles] always had a black band wound around his hat out of respect for his own passing and a look on his face of profound sorrow. Maud would offer him a cape made of crape but he would reject it, outright, as if it had been something intended for the opera. Guiltily, in the dream, after this refusal, Maud would once again drape the heavy material on her own shoulders realizing, as she did so, where it rightfully belonged. (16)

For two years, she had, therefore, to take on the outward appearance of deep sorrow, distress and sadness, as she was expected to look like a withered, grief-stricken widow, when inwardly she was, in fact, blooming for she was finally able to hold the reins of her own life and take on new responsibilities which had previously been her husband's preserve. Maud's aptitude for keeping the account book updated is the most obvious sign of her swift, successful adjustment to her new situation in life and the pen, the phallic object symbolic of power and authority which had once belonged to her husband, became hers and no-one else's after his death: "now she held the pen as easily as a teaspoon in her hand, and the scratch, scratch of the nib was as familiar as the sound of her own breath" (22). Later in the same paragraph this idea could hardly be conveyed any clearly: "As time went by, in fact, Maud found it more and more difficult to believe that she had ever been married at all, more and more difficult to believe that that the pen she held in her hand had not always been her own" (22). It's important to stress that the material circumstances in which Maud found herself after her husband's death were highly favourable for her quest for autonomy and selfhood. By becoming a widow, Maud didn't merely get a room of her own but an entire house (a "building that had never belonged to her" (19) while her husband and parents-in-law were alive) as well as a family business which provided her with means of support. Additionally, the skill she displayed in handling the pen and routinely working on accounts every morning was absolutely essential in earning her the financial independence and self-sufficiency very few women could pride themselves in at the time. This was, in fact, at the very core of first wave feminism's concerns, as Maggie Humm tells us:

> It is by no means insignificant that, from Olive Schreiner to Simone de Beauvoir, feminist writers are typically preoccupied with the theme of materialism and specifically with the issue of women's material differences from men. Virginia Woolf consistently argues that women need financial independence (with "ten shilling notes" as well as with the room of *A Room of One's Own* (1929)), while others, for example Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, contemporaries of Virginia Woolf, pressed for women's employment and domestic parity with men.[3]

It's not that Maud comes across as an active supporter of the women's movement – she's so absorbed in her routine, daily business, and responsibilities that the social changes and ideological battles taking place in the outside world appear to pass her by. In this respect, she's not very different from Fleda, who appears to be even more oblivious to the world around her. Readers immediately perceive her as a romantic, a daydreamer who keeps a diary and reads English poetry compulsively. The diary is here not so much a literary device to allow readers access to Fleda's thoughts and feelings because the omniscient narrator can do it as well; it is rather a noteworthy feature in this character's description, and an extra element to contrast her with Maud, who keeps an account book instead.[4]

As Fleda heads to the woods beside the whirlpool, the omniscient narrator lets us know what's on her mind and – equally revealing – the books she takes to read in such an inspiring setting, "a setting that she hoped was about to cause the spiritual marriage of romance and domesticity in her life" (23). If romance and domesticity make an odd pair, the books Fleda carries with her trying to render them compatible strike us as a peculiar assortment as well: *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), an extended dramatic monologue dealing with a crime committed in late seventeenth-century Rome, which is widely regarded as the greatest work written by Robert Browning (Fleda's favourite poet), Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House* (1854) and Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Swinburne, who was part of the Pre-Raphaelite circle of artists and writers, was known among his contemporaries as much for his poetry as for his behaviour, which openly challenged the conventions observed by the society of his day. He's often described as a sensualist, alive to both pleasure and pain, who couldn't possibly uphold and adopt Victorian attitudes about religion, politics, decorum, and morality. *Poems and Ballads* caused unequalled scandal when it was published precisely because it flouted accepted Victorian moral, religious, and social standards. Analysing the book's critical reception, Allison Pease writes:

> On the surface it seems that what shocked these critics most of all was the open representation of physical sexuality in poetry. But while the reviews focus on obscenity, they are coded in a language that reveals an even deeper anxiety about middle- and upper-class, male privilege in a society whose rigid class boundaries were threatening to give way to a feminized underclass.
>
> Boundaries play a central role in *Poems and Ballads* as well as in the critical debate between Swinburne and his critics. In their representation of what was perceived as masculine women and feminine men, Swinburne's poems threaten to destabilize socially constructed norms of male and female behavior. Likewise, his ambiguous and metonymic treatment of the body, his failure to "dress" desiring bodies in the cloak of language presupposed by the literary mores of the time (it is no coincidence that the Victorians were masterfully elaborated dressers, literally and literarily) threatens to destabilize the boundary between obscenity and art.[5]

Patmore's *Angel in the House* is at the opposite end of the moral spectrum, as it set forth the Victorian ideal of domestic feminine virtue. Nowadays the phrase "angel in the house" is much more famous than the poem from which it derives, but in Victorian England and America Patmore's poetic rendering of marital love sold better than any other work of poetry, except Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859). Patmore found inspiration for the poem in his wife Emily, whom he saw as the embodiment of the ideal Victorian wife/woman. Though it did not receive much attention when it was first published, the poem became increasingly popular throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and continued to be influential into the early twentieth century. As Hellerstein, Hume and Offen observe in their comprehensive study into the lives of nineteenth-century women, "[a]lthough the poem tells us little in specific detail about the nature of Victorian domesticity, it is a very full expression of the idealization of womanhood that is central to the theory about woman's separate domestic sphere."[6] The middle-class ideal of the domestic angel provided women with a very narrow model to emulate – the sexist values of the patriarchal society of that period required them to be passive, meek, powerless and totally devoted and submissive to their husbands. In short, patriarchy wanted women to be models of self-denial. As the women's movement gathered momentum, feminist writers set about getting rid of the angelic ideal, denouncing the coercive nature of the self-sacrificing demands it placed on women. Well into the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf addressed this repressive ideal in her 1931 essay "Professions for Women," in which she famously claimed to have slain the Angel:

> Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had dispatched her. Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or in roaming the world in search of adventures. But it was a real experience; it was an experience that was found to befall all women writers at that time. Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.[7]

When Virginia Woolf wrote this article, the issue of women's marginalised role in society and the consequent demand for political, social and educational equality had been a recurrent topic in the writings of many philosophers and thinkers since the Enlightenment. The French Revolution was particularly inspiring for the advocates of equal rights for women because its ideals of liberty and equality vowed to launch a sustained assault on all forms of tyranny and repression. Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, in England, and Margaret Fuller, in America, were arguably the most passionate, articulate and influential of the early champions of women's rights in the Anglo-Saxon world. Their works sowed the seeds which would only begin to sprout much later. Addressing her audience directly in 1931, Woolf remarks: "You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her – you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House."[8] Had those women been born a few decades earlier, they would have been (too) well acquainted with the angelic role for the very simple reason that they would have been compelled to fit into it. It was the role Maud dutifully fulfilled for six years and the very same one David McDougal appears to be reminding his wife of when he offers her Patmore's *Angel in the House*: "David had given [the book] to her that morning in their rooms, knowing she would want something to read while she waited for him, and feeling the subject suitable to the season when the house would be built" (26). Coming from someone who complains that "she mostly reads... the Britts" and asks "Why not something Canadian?" (75), Patmore's book doesn't seem to be an innocent gift, then, but rather a not-so-subtle attempt to provide his wife with *the* angelic role model: Emily Patmore. Even though Fleda was regarded as an eccentric by most of those who knew her – Patrick's aunt probably speaks for most townspeople when she says: "It's shameful [...] her living in the woods out there, like a gypsy. (...) She should be having babies and minding the house" (61). – she is presented as taking a genuine interest in the poem and in its conventional subject matter: "Fleda was deeply interested in this poem, interested in the poet's perception of the perfect wife, his belief in matrimony as the heavenly ideal" (26). However, she is well aware of her peculiar situation: she is a housewife without a house. As she tells her husband, "I have no house to be angel in" (43). Some of the women in Urquhart's fiction develop a strong attachment to the house where they have spent most of their (sometimes entire) lives, which, thus, become symbols of rootedness by evoking a wealth of memories from the past. Eileen and Esther in *Away*, Klara in *The Stone Carvers* and, to a certain extent, Sara in *The Underpainter* are emotionally linked with their family homes, but such is not the case with Fleda. At a very early stage in the novel, a sentence she writes in her diary suggests that it is her strong wish to have a house built in the woods – "By the end of the summer David has promised (once again) that I shall have my own house here" (27). – but, further on in the narrative, though now and then her thoughts nostalgically turn to the house she and her husband lived in before moving to temporary accommodation in Kick's Hotel, it becomes clear that for her a dream house has considerable advantages over a real one:

> [...] except in those rare moments when she mourned the old place, her home became a dream, a piece of imaginary architecture whose walls and windows existed in the mind and therefore could be rearranged at will. A house where the functions of rooms changed constantly, where a wing could be added or a staircase demolished, where furniture could re-upholster itself, change shape, size, period.
>
> Today, gazing past David's socks, which she had hung on a branch to dry, she watched the ribbons on the survey stakes move in the summer breeze, still cool at this hour, and knew, for her, there would never be an actual house, not soon, not ever. The stakes marked out a dream, an illusion, which, if laboured into permanence, would produce a similar fortress and the feeling of caged torpor she was now beginning to associate with her last dwelling. (125)

However, by the end of the novel, even the imaginary ideal house becomes too claustrophobic for Fleda, who decides that she can "no longer live the closeted life of the recent past" (196). Precisely when the house finally starts to be built and take shape, Fleda writes in her diary: "I just can't imagine the house any more, the views from its windows" (196). Because she refuses to be caged and entrapped, her dream loses all its magic and appeal as she fears it may actually become a nightmare. No house, no angel – it's a role she determines not to be cast in. This development is entirely consistent with the portrait of the character which is gradually drawn throughout the novel and it is in fact suggested at different moments in the narrative, sometimes symbolically such as when Angel, one of the small boats made of folded birch bark which Fleda pushes into the whirlpool current, fails to come back or, at least, to catch Fleda's attention as it does so: "The little boat, 'Angel,' had not returned, or if it had, she had completely failed to notice it" (51).[9] Some other times, Fleda's views on Victorian domesticity and marriage are expressed much more straightforwardly and it becomes quite clear that, although in many ways a romantic and a daydreamer, she certainly does not have a romantic idea of marriage. In her diary she reduces it to its most basic, material (and, therefore, debased) aspect when she asks: "What is marriage, then, if not an accumulation of objects?" (93) She is able to show interest in Patmore's poem and in his notion of the perfect wife but she does not want to emulate Mrs Patmore: "She wouldn't ever want to be Patmore's wife, Patmore's angel. Not now, not ever" (44). She doesn't tell her husband this, however. She lies to him, maintaining that if she had to choose between Patmore's wife and the woman from Canada's history with whom McDougal is completely obsessed, Laura Secord (the American-born heroine of the war of 1812 known for the lonely 32-km long trek she made across the wilderness to warn British and Canadian troops of an impeding attack by American forces), she would rather be the first (43). He, in turn, lies to Fleda when he denies that he married her because of her physical resemblance to Laura Secord (41). Honesty is, thus, far from being the basis of their relationship and, as Fleda observes in her diary, there is hardly any real communication between the two of them:

> Last night when I began to talk I spoke about industry ruining landscape, about factories and mines. About cities and living in them. About railway terminals and shipping offices. David talked about the war. We didn't, somehow, seem to be speaking to each other.
>
> Soon we became very quiet. (93)

The overall view of marriage presented in the novel is, indeed, quite bleak as the couples in it do not definitely come across as soul mates, but rather as individuals who seem to have virtually nothing in common with each other, actually finding it difficult to lead a life together. It's not just Fleda and David whom readers easily perceive as mismatched – Patrick and his "disappointed wife" (58) appear to share the same lot. It is quite obvious that communication between them is just as hard to establish because early on in their marriage they gradually started to drift apart, an irreversible process which the physical distance between them makes painfully evident. In fact, while staying at Niagara Falls recovering from the attack of pneumonia he had suffered the previous winter, Patrick finds it extremely difficult to come up with what to write to his wife, either ending up crumbling the paper, convinced that nothing he's written will remotely interest her (68), or lying, saying that he misses her (95). Patrick's uncle and aunt do not seem able to provide him with an example of domestic bliss, either. Though information on the two of them is rather scarce, for they're essentially minor characters, the general idea conveyed is that they're two very typical grumbling old people, who appear to agree on very few things. As far as Maud and Charles are concerned, the brief glimpses we're allowed to catch of their six-year-old marriage leave us with the impression that, as analysed above, though she mourns him outwardly by wearing uncomfortable dark clothes, inwardly her feelings seem to be altogether different – at no moment in the narrative do we get the slightest hint that Maud would rather have her old life back, as a dependent wife, than having to lead her solitary widow's life. In fact, all indicates otherwise. If we look elsewhere in Urquhart's fiction for a more optimistic view of marriage, it won't be easy to find as there are very few examples of marital bliss.

In *The Whirlpool* motherhood is not the source of infinite joy it was supposed to be for all Victorian women, either. Margaret Fuller wrote in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* that "[e]arth knows no fairer, holier, relation that that of a mother,"[10] but such a categorical assertion is not echoed in the novel, which, instead, presents us with a more nuanced view on the subject. Throughout most of the narrative Maud is unable to connect with her four-year-old son who is initially described as "stiff-legged, uncooperative, responding neither to coaxing nor command" (38) and unable to utter any word or "do anything all by himself" (37). Maud's speechless, unresponsive son makes her feel a deep sense of frustration and helplessness because although she's become used to keeping everything under her firm control after her husband's death, the child presents her with a difficult challenge to which she sometimes responds angrily: " Anger flickered for a moment in her nervous system, like the sun in the puddle, then it drifted away" (37). It is, however, in one of those moments of uncontrolled anger that some progress is achieved: the child utters his first words and sheds his first tears. It's a violent scene which apparently suggests that achievements often involve pain and suffering, simultaneously showing us that the mother who irefully grabs her son by the hair forcing him to face directly into the sun is the same one who "gently [turns him] away from the blinding fire" (57).

Fleda, for her part, “had never been, and somehow knew she would never be, a mother” (124), as the narrator concisely writes. It is not so much a decision, but rather an intuition, as the quotation conveys, but one which stresses her refusal to comply with the contemporary social demands on married women. Society has always made women pay a price for their defiance of its established principles and conventions, and Fleda is no exception. As she shows a blatant disregard for them (but not in an informed, socially aware way, though: she doesn’t, for instance, ever seem to consider the wider issue of women’s place in the society of her day, perhaps because she’s too alienated form the “perceived world” (124) to examine such earthly matters), her unusual behaviour invites mistrust, criticism and disapproval: “The women of the area became suspicious [when she began to neglect her social duties] and, as she became more aloof form them, finally angry and cruel. The men were simply frightened. In another era she might have been burned at the stake” (125). Even Maud thinks of her as “the [military historian’s] *strange* young wife” (67, emphasis added). As Fleda withdraws from society, and at home she’s given less and less of her husband’s time, she escapes into the fantasy world of books and poetry in search of the romance that she cannot find in life, which enables a very peculiar form of adultery to take place:

> As David spent more and more time in his study untangling the mysteries of his battles, she spent more and more time with these other men [the poets she read], until the hallucination of their language, the strength of their fantasies became, at times, more real to her than the man whose meals she cooked, whose socks she darned. (124-5)

The poems she compulsively read could provide her with a wealth of sensations, emotions and adventures well beyond the narrow range of experiences her empty life could offer her, which resulted in her gradual removal from the real world around her: “she sequestered herself with these companions, with their visions, their dark landscapes, until she knew the geography of Venice, of Florence, of the English Lake District, better than the streets of Fort Erie, the hotels of Niagara Falls” (125). The rich cluster of associations evoked by Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* and Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* referred to at an early stage in the novel turn these two works into powerful intertexts for they immediately open a window into the kind of world Fleda wants to be taken into and can, thus, only render more obvious her distaste for the tedious role she’s been allotted in life. Taking her husband’s posting to Niagara as a sign indicating “the end of a period, of a cycle” (125), Fleda went through the sale of the house, the storage of the furniture and the auction sale of most of her household objects with a remarkably dispassionate attitude and headed for Niagara Falls looking forward to some change in her life. And it did take place, caused, to a great extent, by the arrival of Patrick, the poet. Like everyone else in this novel, he, too, has an obsession: he earned "a subsistence salary as a clerk in the capital city, grasping desperately for bits of unstructured time in order to pursue his obsession with the art of poetry" (58). But soon Fleda takes over as his main obsession. He first sees her through his fieldglasses, when he is taking a walk in the woods, becoming a voyeur from that moment on. And that's exactly what he wants to be – he is determined to keep a distance between them and, thus, be able to fantasise about her without any interference from reality, to create *his* own mental picture of the woman who shares his love of poetry but with whom he doesn't wish to discuss it for he simply does not want this ethereal being to materialise into a real, flesh and blood woman. Much the same way Fleda wants her house to remain a dream, Patrick wishes her to be *his* dream, therefore avoiding to meet her for as long as he can:

> He didn't want her to have a voice, did not wish to face the actuality of her speech, how words would change the shape of her mouth, stiffen the relaxed bend of her neck which he had seen when he watched her read. One more step on his part and she would leave, forever, the territory of his dream and he would lose something – some power, some privacy, some control. (86)

"Control" – that's a key word because Patrick is presented as a possessive voyeur: "He wanted to capture her somehow, to put her where she belonged in *his* story, back inside the fieldglasses where he could control the image" (112, italics in original). When they are finally introduced he is even "briefly angry" (112) as he senses a close intimacy between Fleda and David, expressed in words and gestures which make Patrick feel excluded from the "fragmented talk" (113) exchanged by the couple. "This wife, thought Patrick, this nurturer, this housekeeper!" (113) The magical aura surrounding his dream woman, his goddess is, thus, becoming slightly faint. For Fleda, however, their first meeting has a quite different effect for it awakens in her the need – and even urgency – to finally introduce the profound changes to her life that she has been craving for:

> Every cell in her body, every synapse in her brain, demanded the presence of the poet in her life. As if all the reading, all the dreaming, had been one long preparation for his arrival.
>
> His arrival, which coincided so neatly with her departure. Departure from everything she assumed she would be: from the keeping of various houses, from the sameness of days lived out inside the blueprint of artificially heated rooms, from pre-planned, rigidly timed events – when this happened in the morning and that happened in the afternoon, just because it always had and always would. (126)

When Fleda decides to cut “her long, long hair” (127), she is, in fact, symbolically cutting all the remaining ties with convention and social precepts and signalling that she has reached a turning point in her life. She then becomes fully aware of the poet’s interest in herself when she sees him “collecting her discarded hair” (127), which is for her a source of mixed feelings: “the knowledge both frightened and delighted her. ‘How wonderful this is,’ she whispered to herself as she moved quietly away so that he would not see her. ‘To think that he looks at me’” (127). Being looked at and admired for her own beauty and gracefulness, not for her physical resemblance to someone else, is something she clearly finds flattering and even empowering as it seems to enable her to develop self-awareness by making sense of her own world and finding her place in it: “For the first time she felt the several parts of her world interlock... felt herself a part of the whirlpool, a part of the art of poetry” (128). By identifying with the whirlpool, Fleda appears to begin to see herself as Patrick has always seen her (45, 91, 110) – as part of nature, an association which is nowadays either forcefully supported or strongly challenged by diverging strands of ecofeminism. This is obviously a recent debate and, therefore, unknown to nineteenth-century people; it just makes it quite clear that when writers bring back the past and write stories set in bygone eras, they will inevitably inform those narratives with ideas, discussions and notions that are distinctive of their contemporary culture, thereby making anachronism a relatively common feature of their fictions. *The Whirlpool*’s use of the binary self/other further proves it: Patrick’s perception of Fleda and of the way he wants to gain complete knowledge of her is articulated in existentialist terms which were only fully developed by mid-twentieth century:

> Now Patrick understood that, like a child at play, observed, but not conscious of observation, the woman would reveal sides of herself to him that she had revealed to no one else. He would experience her when she was whole, not fragmented into considerations of self and other. (94)

This binary is recurrently, and very explicitly, referred to throughout the novel because Patrick stubbornly installs it to separate himself from Fleda, conspicuously othering her, even siding with David in order to give extra emphasis and visibility to the distance he wants to keep between them: “In a subtle shift of alliance, he entered David’s territory, cunningly, as if he had been there all along. Fleda was isolated, other, driven to remote corners of the acre, taking long, desperate walks [...], while they talked and talked, excluding her” (173-4). For Fleda this is totally unexpected as she had taken the poet’s voyeurism to mean a clear willingness on his part to develop a physical intimacy with her.

When it becomes obvious that her longing and desire for Patrick will never be satisfied in a fulfilling relationship, Fleda feels angry and even betrayed: “Her first reaction was anger. How could he disappear, go from her like this? She had *felt* his attention” (172, italics in original).[11] As Fleda at last realises that she had completely misunderstood Patrick, it becomes plainly evident that “all the reading, all the dreaming” had not been enough preparation to understand such an opaque individual. Quite contrarily, those readings and illusions had only fuelled wild fantasies that could never be fulfilled: “Perhaps I’ve always waited for the demon lover to leave the maelstrom and enter my house, through some window while I slept on... unaware,” (136) she writes in her diary. The poet clearly comes across as a lot more timid and faint-hearted than the demon lover of Fleda’s dreams, which is all the better for her. In fact, the heroines of Jane Urquahart’s novels who, inspired by literature or myth, develop an obsession for men they take to embody this male ideal end up paying a high price for the pursuit of their fantasies. In *Away* they cost Mary her own life, and Ann, in *Changing Heaven*, goes through intense suffering before she is finally able to break free from the enslaving relationship she keeps with Arthur, her demon lover modelled on *Wuthering Heights*’ Heathcliff. (The quotation above seems to be an intertextual reference to Emily Brontë’s novel as well).

Fleda is, thus, made to learn that life does not mirror art and fantasy: “She let him go. The man who visited had nothing to do with the other, the one in her dreams, the absent one” (175). At this stage in her development she could have opted for the path taken, for instance, by Catherine Morland, the protagonist of Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, who becomes a compulsive reader of Gothic novels at an early stage in the narrative but eventually realises life has nothing to do with such ridiculously formulaic fictions. She, therefore, gets her feet firmly back on the ground, ready to play the conservative role of sensible society girl and meet the expectations held by those around her about young women like herself. But Fleda is not willing to give in, she will not relinquish her fantasy world that easily because it has enabled her to dream with a different kind of life, having somehow paved the way for her quest for selfhood – a quest that, as she learns from Patrick’s icy response to her intense longing for him, has to be hers and no one else’s because pursuing other people’s quests is ultimately meaningless and frustrating: “She had felt part of his [Patrick’s] quest, his desire to break free, to attempt the whirlpool. Part of the creation of poetry” (173). The fact that she feels let down and betrayed by him does not discourage her, though, from moving on and venture into the unknown, leaving her husband and her old life behind. Interestingly, her inspirational figure this time is not a foreign literary creation, an illusion borrowed from someone else's imagination, but Laura Secord, a flesh and blood woman from Canadian history,[12] about whom she writes in her diary:

> I think about Laura Secord living for sixty more years in the same house, dreaming of one long walk she took in the wilderness, telling the story, over and over to herself, to anyone else who would listen.
>
> Nobody understood. It wasn't the message that was important. It was the walk. The journey. Setting forth. (197)

It's ironic to notice that David used to ask her to literally *dress* the part of Laura Secord (a kind of erotic game in which he made Fleda wear a dress similar to the one he thought Secord had worn on her dangerous journey, which seemed to arouse his sexual desire) and, as the novel comes to a close, she ends up *acting* the part. She was never the one obsessed with Laura Secord, yet she's the one who sets out on a journey following the celebrated heroine's route. Journey is here a metaphor for the ability to suppress one's limitations, cut with inhibiting social rules and conventions and face up to the challenge of the unknown. McDougal, in turn, who was the one Secord came to in a dream (his last one, actually) assigning him the mission to "*remind them*" (72, italics in original), stays behind, distressed and not knowing what to do when he finds Fleda gone. In fact, men's behaviour in this novel is fraught with contradictions (or weaknesses, some might say). Browning is no exception for he is presented as a slave to order, timetables and routine, but, feeling the imminence of his death he seems to regret not to have led a life like Shelley's – short but lived to the full. Yet this is the poet whose works completely enrapture Fleda, who, therefore, never parts with them – not even (or especially not) when she embarks on her journey – for they provide her with the romance she looks for in literature to make up for a life which she perceives to be ridden with too many concessions to meaningless social precepts (196). She would most probably feel disappointed if she knew that "he never once broke the well-established order that ruled the days of his life" (4). Patrick, for his part, is the most mystifying of them all. His arrival is the final push Fleda needed to leap to freedom, while he himself plunges to death in the whirlpool. If this were a realist novel written at the turn of the twentieth century, the heroine would, in the end, feel cornered and, unable to find a way out in a society fiercely hostile to women who dared to transgress moral and gender rules, would typically commit suicide – like, for example, Edna

Pontellier, in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) – but in *The Whirlpool* women are not the defeated ones, but rather the resilient survivors. Maud is by no means less defiant than Fleda. Quite the opposite: because she's more focused and down-to-earth, she is no doubt more fully aware of the consequences of subverting social expectations. At the beginning of the novel she is at an intermediate stage in her development, having already successfully dealt with difficult challenges over the previous two years. She is therefore mid-way in her journey towards selfhood. In other words, the metamorphosis from caterpillar into butterfly is already firmly under way. Hers is a chromatic journey towards light and colour, which is signalled immediately after Charles's death by her overwhelming need for light: "During that first long night, while the child slept, Maud brought every moveable source of light into the parlour and there, surrounded by scores of candles and several coal-oil lamps, she began to play the piano [...]" (20). However, black was the colour she wore for the next two years and, as the novel opens, she is on her first day of half-mourning, thus able "to dress herself in a black and white cotton stripe" (21). By the end of the novel, though, she is beginning a new cycle in her life and the colour she's wearing makes it quite clear that a complete break with the past has taken place: "Maud was longer in mourning. She had dressed today for the first time in bright yellow, the colour of her autumn flowers" (209). This flagrant disregard of the strict dress code she had obediently followed hitherto is the clear outward sign of a much wider change that occurs in the last section of the novel and which is, to a great extent, brought about by her son. The boy himself makes important progress throughout the summer months, which appears to be the ultimate result of seemingly non-sensical dialogues with Patrick. The poet seems to somehow strike a peculiar relationship with the child and, following the two occasions on which they meet, the boy starts to articulate whole sentences he's picked from other people's conversations and actually begins to communicate in his own limited, awkward way. Patrick's influence on the little boy's progress and development is not much different from the one he had in Fleda's final decision to walk away from her "closeted life" (196). He brings changes to other people's lives but ends up losing his own at thirty-three (an age whose symbolic associations can hardly escape us), thus becoming a kind of martyr figure who sacrifices himself for others. His decision to swim the whirlpool is at first presented as a sudden whim, a desire to impress Fleda and be part of her dreams (89), but as the novel comes to its close it seems to result from an altogether different desire: embarking on a journey of regression, apparently not just to his childhood, a time when he “had been a swimmer” (69), but even further back to the womb, whose cosiness and comfort he seems to be looking for in the waters of the whirlpool: “Patrick chose the vacuum, the neutrality. The softness of water and the sound it makes, the places it goes. All decisions having been made thousands of years ago” (200). This interpretation also appears to be supported by the similarity Maud finds between Patrick’s beautiful dead body and that of a child’s:

> The drowning had hardly affected him except to place a thin, almost unnoticeable film across his eyes. But that was merely death. The rest of him was undamaged, perfect. He was like a dead child.
>
> She had seen the film before, many times. It reminded her of the caul which had partially covered her child’s face at birth, except that here, in death, it only covered the eyes. (209)

There had actually been an argument between Maud and her mother-in-law over the caul covering her son’s face. The elder woman insisted that it should be kept to bring the baby good luck, while Maud, refusing to believe such superstitions, determined to get rid of it. It was apparently the first assertive decision she made during her married years, perhaps the only one, for there isn’t reference to any other in the novel. By the end of the narrative she has, however, come a long way, and as her initially dependent, speechless child blooms impressively, moving nimbly around the house “like a cat” (144) and astonishing her “by the extent of his vocabulary” (180), she is at last able to connect with him, realising that he “was the possessor of all the light and that it was she, not he, that had been the dark wall” (193). Death had completely taken hold of her, not surprisingly since, as historian Simon Schama tells us, death was an immense presence in Victorian life:

> The Victorians [...] ought to have been hardened to death. It was all around them: in the typhus-riddled barracks of soldiers; in the cholera-infested slums of the poor; in the sputum-stained handkerchiefs of the tubercular middle classes. The high-minded salons would be reduced to silence by sudden, terrifying fits of uncontrollable coughing while well-dressed guests stood suspended between compassion and terrified self-preservation as the mucus droplets misted the aspidistras.
>
> The omnipresence of death seemed disproportionately chastening to a generation breezy with not entirely undeserved confidence that they had done more than any of their predecessors to master their physical environment.[13]

Running the undertaking establishment only made it easier for her to become completely overwhelmed and obsessed by such dark world from which her son ultimately rescues her. He reminds her that she is among the living and should, therefore, honour life, not death, finally enabling her to see how utterly senseless it is to keep the personal objects – even the memories – of the dead people pulled from the whirlpool by the Old River Man. At the end of the novel she symbolically disposes of “everything, all the crape, all the mauve and black and white cotton, all the kept things connected with death” (209).

The Whirlpool is, thus, optimistic in tone about female agency. As its tale of two women’s growth towards self-determination shows, life doesn’t have to be a dead end for women. Even if they’re living in a time when odds are against them, they can, and should, struggle to assume power over their own lives and be able to shape their identities.

Notes

1 The Robert Browning framework is included in *Storm Glass* as a separate story.

2 Jane Urquhart. *The Whirlpool*. 1986. Boston: David R. Godine, 1990: pp. 28-9. All further page references are given in the text.

3 Maggie Humm. "First Wave Feminism." *Feminisms: a Reader*. Ed. Maggie Humm. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992: p. 14.

4 The diary is also a reminder that Jane Urquhart found inspiration for Fleda in a historical source. In the acknowledgements page she writes: "Parts of this novel were inspired and informed by Julia Cruikshank's diary, published in 1915 and entitled *Whirlpool Heights: The Dream-house on the Niagara River*" (215). With respect to Maud, Urquhart modelled her on her husband's grandmother, as she has said in interviews, such as "Interview with Jane Urquhart" by Linda Richards (*January Magazine*, June 2001), which can be read online at:
http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/urquhart.html.

5 Allison Pease. "Questionable Figures: Swinburne's Poems and Ballads." *Victorian Poetry*. Volume 35, no. 1. Spring 1996. Accessed via the Internet at
http://vp.engl.wvu.edu/clcshow/pease.htm.

6 Erna O. Hellerstein, Leslie P. Hume, Karen M. Offen. *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in the Nineteenth-Century England, France and the United States*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1981: p. 134.

7 Virginia Woolf. "Professions for Women." *On Women and Writing: Her Essays, Assessments and Arguments*. Ed. Michèle Barrett. London: The Women's Press, 1996 (1979): p. 60.

8 *Ibid*. pp. 58-9.

9 These games "played with small, benign toys" (50) were perhaps inspired by Shelley, known in his youth for his habit of sailing paper boats, and who was the author of *Adonais* (1821), the name Fleda gave to one of her toy boats.

10 Margaret Fuller. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. 1845. New York: The Norton Library, 1971: p. 96.

11 It's interesting to notice that Fleda never contemplates, either in her thoughts or in her diary, the consequences to her marriage of her having a romantic relationship with Patrick. It may suggest that because Fleda is beyond the grasp of social conventions and

impositions, adultery (which is, like marriage, a social construct) is a hollow concept for her. She actually seems to think of Patrick as a gift from her husband: “As she was returning from the whirlpool that afternoon, she thought about her husband’s gifts to her. Books and books and now, finally, the poet himself in the flesh” (127).

12 At an early stage in the novel Fleda observes that because Secord is “the only woman in the whole story,” David “romanticize[s] her to *death*” (42, italics in original). Certainly throughout the time, Laura Secord inspired fantasy and myth, which at a certain stage was used as a pretext by male-biased historiography to exclude her from the record, as Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice tell us:

> This tendency [to keep women out of the making and writing of history], which was already apparent at the turn of the of the century, reached its zenith in Canada during the 1930s in the very public battle waged over the place of Laura Secord, and by extension all Canadian women, in history. The academic debunkers of this famous Upper Canadian heroine [...] argued that her much celebrated walk between Queenston Heights and Beaver Dams had had no discernible impact on the outcome of the War of 1812. This well-publicized assertion infuriated Ontario’s local history community, whose female leaders had helped to establish Secord’s popularity as a historic figure at the end of the nineteenth century. The debate has never been entirely resolved, but the removal of Laura Secord from the pages of academic history in the 1930s suggests just how closely allied historical professionalization was to the masculinization of history. (B. Boutelier and A. Prentice. “Introduction: Locating Women in the Work of History.” *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History*. Eds. B. Boutilier and A. Prentice. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997: p.5)

13 Simon Schama. *A History of Britain: 1776-2000 The Fate of Empire (Volume 3)*. London: BBC Worldwide, 2004 (2002): p. 168.

2. (Hi)storytelling as a survival tool in *Away*

Are myth and history separate forms of narrative, or can (and do) they overlap? With the academicisation of history in the nineteenth century and the development by Ranke of the so-called scientific method of historical investigation, the historian's task became very clearly defined: producing historical accounts based on contemporary sources and, through exhaustive archival research and philological criticism of documents, purging them of all traces of legend and myth. As the eminent philosopher of history Friedrich Hegel put it, "History is prose, and myths fall short of History."[1] Hegel saw similarities between poetry and the writing of history, as referred to in part I of this study, but he made it quite clear that historians were not allowed the creative freedom that poets can legitimately enjoy. Analysing Hegel's important contribution to the discipline, Hayden White explains the philosopher's thought:

> History stands somewhere between poetry and oratory because, although its form is poetic, its content is prosaic. Hegel put it thus: "It is not exclusively the manner in which history is written, but the nature of its *content*, which makes it prose" [*Lectures on Aesthetics* – Part III].
>
> History deals with the "prose of life," the materials of a specifically "common life" (*Gemeinwesen*) [...].[2]

However, the clear separation of history from fiction and legend had long been an issue before nineteenth-century historians and philosophers of history addressed it as a subject of crucial importance. In fact, they did it in the wider context of the positivist legacy of the Age of Reason. Deeply engaged in a rationalist crusade against ignorance and superstition , the scholars and thinkers of the Enlightenment made facts *the* base on which to build human knowledge, keeping a rigid dichotomy between fact and fiction, between science and mysticism, at the forefront of their mind and work. That dichotomy was naturally extended to history, a discipline the Enlighteners founded on the belief that it was the record of progress and human perfectibility. To borrow Tamsin Spargo's words, they are credited with having put history on "its forward march away from the seductions of myth, replete with meaning but short on verifiable truth, towards the sober embrace of its true partner, science."[3] Enlightenment thinkers believed that historical truth could only come from the objective examination of the human record out of which Enlightenment ideas made meaning. Their critical principles of analysis dramatically reduced the range of sources that historians could rely on, since many of those previously used were deemed unreliable, as White observes:

> This meant that whole bodies of knowledge from the past – everything contained in legend, myth, fable – were excluded as potential evidence for determining the truth about the past – that is to say, that aspect of the past which such bodies of data directly represented to the historian trying to reconstruct a life in its integrity and not merely in terms of its most *rationalistic* manifestations. Because the Enlighteners themselves were devoted to reason and interested in establishing its authority against the superstition, ignorance, and tyranny of their own age, they were unable to credit as anything more than testimony to the essential irrationality of past ages those documents in which those ages represented their truths to themselves, in myths, legends, fables, and the like.[4]

However, a later generation of Enlighteners – Gibbon, Hume and Kant amongst them – approached this issue from a different angle, actually blurring the distinction between history and fiction which had been so firmly drawn by earlier thinkers such as Pierre Bayle and Voltaire. Yet such "fictionalisation" of history, as Hayden White puts it,[5] aroused little enthusiasm in the nineteenth century – which E.H. Carr described as "a great age for facts,"[6] – a period when historical scholarship headed in the opposite direction, aiming at aligning the newly independent academic discipline with modern scientific research and severing its ancient connection with the intuitive literary arts. With its insistence on dispassionate objectivity as the historian's proper point of view, historicism formed entire generations of influential scholars who, in turn, spread its method and fundamental principles far beyond the German universities where it was first developed. Its enduring legacy impacted strongly on modern Western historiography, whose intellectual foundations are, thus, greatly indebted to Ranke's teachings, as easily inferred from the following quotation: "By the twentieth century, history was firmly established in European and American universities as a professional field, resting on exact methods and making productive use of archival collections and new sources of evidence."[7]

But the twentieth century was also a time of doubt and cultural relativism, which informed the works of many scholars who made historical writing the subject of their studies and analyses. As Hayden White tells us,

> "[c]ontinental European thinkers – from Valéry and Heidegger to Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault – have cast serious doubts on the value of a specifically "historical" consciousness, stressed the fictive character of historical reconstructions, and challenged history's claim to a place among the sciences.[8]

The historicist tradition came under heavy criticism, since it was now argued that the ideal of objectivity was nothing more than that – an ideal – and therefore unattainable because, as E.H. Carr successfully summed it up, "[t]he historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which is very hard to eradicate."[9] First published over forty years ago, E.H. Carr’s words no longer find it difficult to gain acceptance and support in the academic circle. Quite the opposite, a very broad consensus exists today over the serious limitations of a concept of history which defines complete objectivity as its basic tenet, as Peter Burke explains:

> However hard we struggle to avoid the prejudices associated with colour, creed, class or gender, we cannot avoid looking at the past from a particular point of view. Cultural relativism applies to historical writing itself. Our minds do not reflect reality directly; we perceive the world only through a grid of conventions, schemata and stereotypes. [10]

It seems, then, that contemporary theory on historical writing (or, at least, one of its influential strains) takes up where the late Enlighteners mentioned above left off – challenging the distinction between fiction and history and stressing the fictive nature of the latter, thereby blurring the distinction between the two. This debate has mobilised historians, critics of various backgrounds and novelists whose works, informed with the postmodernist thought, have challenged the traditional view of history as a univocal narrative based on evidence and fact, arguing that the notion behind such grand narrative is no longer credible in an age in which so many voices have come together to express strong criticism of universalising, essentialist notions of truth and knowledge and to decry all forms of totalisation. The contribution of writers of fiction has been just as relevant to this discussion as that of authors of theoretical works, as some of the novels written by Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes or Graham Swift – to name but a few celebrated Anglo-Saxon writers – clearly exemplify. Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), for instance, is a very obvious case of the postmodernist scrutiny that history has been subjected to by fiction writers. In this multilayered novel, Swift voices thought-provoking ideas about the nature and purpose of history through the novel’s central character, a history teacher who, faced with an unimpressed group of students, is compelled to explain them why he became interested in history in his youth:

> My becoming a history teacher can be directly ascribed to the stories my mother told me as a child, when, like most children, I was afraid of the dark. (...)
>
> And even as a schoolboy, when introduced to history as an object of study, when nursing indeed an unfledged lifetime’s passion, it was still the fabulous aura of history that lured me, and I believed, perhaps like you, that history was a myth. Until a series of encounters with the Here and Now gave a sudden pointedness to my studies. Until the Here and Now, gripping me by the arm, slapping my face and telling me to take a good look at the mess I was in, informed that history was no invention but indeed existed – and I had become part of it.[11]

He ends up openly admitting that it is history as the reassuring, all-answers-providing narrative which has always fascinated him: “And can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some golden nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark?"[12] Earlier on in the novel, he had provided his students with an unorthodox definition of his subject: "I present to you History, the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama. History, and its near relative, Histrionics..."[13]

This notion of history as basically a form of storytelling, as a grand narrative, or a fabrication not only draws attention to the partiality and preconceptions that discredit historical discourse, but also implies that history has some affinity with myth, both in terms of nature and purpose. According to this perspective, far from offering true, factual and objective accounts of the past, history is fundamentally a cultural construction intended to provide explanations about the past, satisfy the need for a collective identity, and create order out of chaos by presenting events in a teleological sequence, thus establishing continuity as inherent to the historical process. And what is myth but a grand narrative developed to offer clear-cut answers, explain the inexplicable by rendering the unknown familiar, and strengthen the sense of community of the ones who share a knowledge of those narratives? Donna Rosenberg, in her book *Folklore, Myth and Legends: a World Perspective*, defines myth as follows:

> A myth is a sacred story from the past. It may explain the origin of the universe and of life, or it may express its culture's moral values in human terms. Myths concern the powers to control the human world and the relationship between those powers and human beings. Although myths are religious in their origin and function, they may also be the earliest form of history, science, or philosophy.[14]

Caude Lévi-Strauss, the structuralist critic most closely associated with the study of myth, also draws this parallel between history and myth, maintaining that they fulfil a very similar function, and going as far as to suggest that there is a fluidity between the two:

> I am not far from believing that, in our societies, history has replaced mythology and fulfils the same function, that for societies without writing and without archives the aim of mythology is to ensure that as closely as possible – complete closeness is obviously impossible – the future will remain faithful to the present and to the past. For us, however, the future should be always different, and ever more different, from the present, some difference depending, of course, on our political preferences. But nevertheless the gap which exists in our mind to some extent between mythology and history can probably be reached by studying histories which are conceived as not at all separated from but as a continuation of mythology.[15]

The so-called problematisation of history carried out under the postmodern influence has led not only to a remarkable revival of historical fiction but also to renewed interest in myth. Marie Vautier reminds us that "[m]yth came to be a central focus of literature in the

Western world with the rise of European Romanticism"[16] and it is interesting to notice that in recent years, just like then, the presence of myth in literature has often be tied to explorations of the theme of national or cultural identity and even, at times, of nationalism.

In Canadian literature, the explosion of historical fiction over the last decades is frequently interpreted as a response to the fairly common idea that Canada lacks a sense of history. In fact, the number of texts written under the mode that Linda Hutcheon has labelled historiographic metafiction and those Marie Vautier refers to as "straightforward historical novels"[17] have caught worldwide critical attention, not just for their sheer quantity, but also, and above all, for their quality. Valuable contributions to the revival of this once virtually dormant genre have been made by several influential contemporary Canadian authors such as Rudy Wiebe, Joy Kogawa, Timothy Findley, Michael Ondaatje or Margaret Atwood. The latter, who is arguably Canada's most eminent novelist, has turned to the past in two novels written over the last decade to engage in the retrieval of Canadian women's voices. *Alias Grace* (1996) and *Blind Assassin* (2000), each in its own way, reveal an interest in the past and in female versions of history which can be traced back to Atwood's early career as a poet. Her third book of poems, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), inspired in her readings of English writer Susanna Moodie's books about her immigrant experiences in nineteenth-century Canada, signalled Atwood's desire to explore the inner lives of women whose personal histories come up against sweeping events and circumstances such as dislocation, social and economic frailty or political change and turmoil. In the introduction to her non fiction work *Negotiating with the Dead* (2002), Margaret Atwood draws up a list of reasons for writing most commonly cited by authors when questioned about their motives. Among the ones she places at the top we'll find: "To set down the past before it is all forgotten. To excavate the past *because* it has been forgotten."[18] Later in the paragraph she adds: "To express the unexpressed life of the masses. To name the hitherto unnamed."[19] Of course when one sets out to recover suppressed versions of the past and chronicle the lives of marginalised groups, one has to carry out a painstaking research and will inevitably come across conflicting versions, which will most probably raise very pertinent questions about the very notion of historical truth, as Atwood explains in a 1997 interview:

> When I was young I believed that "nonfiction" meant "true." But you read a history written in, say, 1920 and a history of the same events written in 1995 and they're very different. There may not be one Truth – there may be several truths – but saying that is not to say that reality doesn't exist.

> When I wrote *Alias Grace*, for example, about Canada's famous 19th-century convicted murderer Grace Marks, I knew there were some things that weren't true about this historical figure. After all my research, I still do not know who killed Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. Someone killed them. To say that we don't know exactly who did it is not to say that nobody killed them. There is a truth in their deaths, but some other truths – such as who really did the killing – are not knowable.[20]

This alternative approach to pastness, interrogating canonical truths in the historical record and often interweaving personal histories with public events is indeed a very contemporary trend in Canadian literature. Jane Urquhart places herself in that trend with her historical novels, and especially so with her third one, *Away* (1993), which blends history and myth, reality and magic, the personal and the political. Like *The Stone Carvers*, it extends backwards and forwards in time and straddles two centuries and two continents: the novel spans a hundred and forty years and is set in Ireland and Canada. It's a memory narrative which traces the O'Malley family's complex and layered past through the perspective of the last of the line, Esther O'Malley Robertson, who, at the age of eighty-two, looks lingeringly back on her family's history over a single night, which she knows is the "last night she will remain beside the icy, receptive waters of the Great Lake."[21] The first lines make it quite clear that this is going to be a narrative in which central roles are taken by women – women endowed with great sensitivity and strong intuitive powers. As the narrative unfolds, they come across as ethereal, not of this world and, therefore, hard to decipher, as female characters often are in Urquhart's fiction. The story is told in a writing style which is both oral-like and intensely lyrical – it starts off as a kind of marvellous tale Esther tells to herself before falling into her eternal sleep. It is stated that, with no other company but the Great Lake, there is "no one to listen" (3) to her, but because the story easily engulfs readers, they themselves soon become Esther's surrogate audience.

Her tale first takes us to pre-famine Ireland, introducing us to Mary, Esther's great-grandmother. The novel's first paragraphs had acquainted us with the mystical aura surrounding this family's women and Mary and her story certainly play a leading part in this engaging and moving exploration of themes of love, loss, cultural heritage and identity, with supernatural undertones running through the narrative. Her life is changed forever by a dramatic encounter with a dying sailor on a beach on Rathlin Island, off the northern Irish coast. The young man is washed ashore amidst a miraculous abundance of cabbages, silver pots and barrels of whiskey. In such lonely, wind-swept, rocky shores, people had never seen "so bountiful a harvest" (12) before, and were, therefore, immediately convinced that this miracle, as they saw it, would have a cost, a price would have to be paid. And, at this moment in the novel, Celtic myth takes hold of the story:

> But as the priest, Mary's mother, and all the other islanders knew, no unplanned harvest was reaped without a cost. Sudden wealth such as this was a gift from "the Formoire, the ones from the sea, the others." All the green and brown and silver objects on the beach could only have been deposited there in payment for something stolen. (...)
>
> Mary, they believed, was lying in the arms of her faery-daemon lover; or, what was more likely, what was left of Mary was lying in the arms of what was left of her faery-daemon lover, he having returned – with her – to the sea from which he had undeniably emerged.
>
> Those who looked down at the beach that morning crossed themselves and turned to Mary's mother with compassion in their eyes. They knew, and she knew, that Mary was away. (12-3)

Drawing on the knowledge of their culture's ancient mythology, the island's population firmly believed that Mary had been taken away to the spirit realm by her daemon lover, sharing the assumption that what was left of Mary on earth was only her physical replica: "There was no doubt in any mind now that this girl on the beach, sitting on the strange black stones, was merely a flimsy replica left by 'them' or by him in Mary's place" (14). And Mary did act differently from that moment on. Mysterious and distant, she seemed to move about in a state of dreamy activity, spending most of her time bathing in the sea – we had been told in the novel's opening page that "[t]here was always water involved" (3) – where she would apparently feel the sailor's presence and have imaginary romantic encounters with him.

Mary's change is further emphasised by her announcement that her name is not Mary, but rather Moira, a name she says has been given to her by the young man, who had uttered this single word before eventually dying in her arms. Mary is obviously a name with strong religious associations and in this novel's context it seems to be very highly charged with symbolism. Just as the Christian tradition sees Mary as the chosen one to give birth to the son of God, who brought salvation to the world, *Away*'s Mary is also seen by the islanders as the chosen one to be taken away and swapped for plenty and abundance. This parallel appears to be confirmed by Mary's task of washing and dressing the drowned sailor for burial, which, once again, evokes religious associations. Dropping such richly symbolic name – dropping any name, in fact, as long as it is one's own – has its toll, the novel seems to suggest. In fact, Mary's name change and her new self as Moira do not appear to be as altogether positive or empowering. At least, the judgement Eileen will make many years later – having herself been forced to draw painful lessons from life in her youth – is unequivocally disapproving, sternly telling Esther not to let the same happen to her:

> "Never allow anything to change your name," Esther's grandmother had warned her when she began to tell this story. "My poor mother – your great-grandmother – was destined to live out the actuality of Ovid's intention. *Of bodies changed to other forms I tell.* Never allow anyone, anything to change your name," she repeated. "My name is Eileen, yours is Esther. Let's keep it that way."(8)

Mary's story is thus analogised with the ones told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, a fabulous collection of over two hundred classical myths, all of which dealing, to a greater or lesser extent, with the concepts of metamorphosis and change. However, though involved in a story with an undeniable mythical component, Mary is far more complex than any of the two-dimensional characters taking part in the classical myths immortalised by Ovid. There is, nonetheless, at least one thing relating Mary's experience to the one of many of the humans featured in Ovid's stories: they come across as powerless instruments of a superior will that has the ability to take over and change their lives, which is entirely beyond their control. This sense of inevitability or predestination is very clearly present in *Away*: As quoted above, Eileen tells Esther that Mary "was *destined* to live the actuality of Ovid's intention" (8, emphasis added) and Mary herself seemed to perceive what had happened to her in very similar terms: "She felt contented, knowing her life's *destiny* to be fulfilled, her heart given or taken away" (17, emphasis added). Such resignation in a young woman who, overnight, becomes detached and alienated from the world around her appears to be a rather disempowering development in her life. She discards her old self as Mary, but as Moira she actually seems to be selfless on account of her paralysing obsession with the one she felt "had been given as a gift to her" (24). As talks about Mary's change quickly spread all over the island, "[o]ne man remembered his mother telling of a fisherman she knew from the mainland who was abducted by a mermaid" (17). It's interesting to notice that in Mary's story there is at this level a peculiar role reversal since the drowned sailor is the alien seducer who captivates Mary with his song: "His song was like no other song" (24) to her and, as a response, she (who had formerly been an eloquent speaker) turned songs into her only form of speech. Described as having been one of "the brightest and the best" (18) in her community, many years later Mary will be perceived by her own descendants as having discarded her identity by giving up her name, her eloquence, her sense of reality, in short, her own *self*.

As for the islanders who witnessed Mary metamorphosing into a strange, awe-inspiring girl, the whole change was very mystifying for it did not entirely fit their expectations, which were shaped by their knowledge of the old folk tales they were so familiar with. For instance, unlike what they had initially predicted, Mary did not die or waste away, but rather "seemed stronger and more beautiful than ever" (22), becoming an object of desire to men all over the island, the local priest included. As a result, they avoided her and, just as her "faery-daemon lover" was seen as the "other" (23), Mary was equally put into the same category by the islanders. This is a recurrent pattern in Jane Urquahart's fiction: women who do not conform with the socially constructed standards of *acceptable* behaviour become the favourite target of people's disapproval and criticism, being openly ostracised in some cases. Yet, as Eileen wisely puts it, "[a]ny interpretation is a misinterpretation"[22] (12). It's easy to dismiss Mary as a poor deluded creature suffering from hallucinations, but in fact it is in those moments when she feels to be in the presence of "her pale swimmer" (24) that she is made to develop an intense awareness of her Irishness and of her people's heritage and history.

The literary and cultural traditions have repeatedly associated Ireland with the figure of a woman. The name of the country itself comes from that of a woman, Ériu, a goddess. James MacKillop tells us that she is "[o]ne of three sisters, divine eponyms and tutelary goddesses of Ireland, along with Banba and Fódla; sometimes Ériu is a personification of Ireland. According to an oft-cited passage from the Lebor Gabála [Book of Invasions] Ériu is chosen to give her name to Ireland itself."[23] As Laura Vasconcellos observes, "Eriu simboliza a própria Irlanda, dando, deste modo, à sua origem, à sua identidade, um cunho bem feminino."[24] If it weren't for this firmly established association, one might feel tempted to identify the drowned sailor with ailing Eire. He washed ashore on Rathlin Island in 1842, just a few years before that terrible disaster in nineteenth-century Ireland, the great famine, a major tragedy taking place after many other ones in the country's troubled history.

It is a selection of people, places and scenes from that historical and cultural heritage – a very special kind of pageant, then – that Mary sees in those ecstatic moments when she feels to be with her otherworld lover. To adequately convey the magical nature of these episodes, the narrator borrows from the magic realist genre, which leads Herb Wyile to observe that "*Away*, like other magic realist texts, illustrates the possibilities of the mode for representing the interplay between myth and history."[25] At first Mary doesn't fully grasp the meaning of what she sees and doesn't recognise the landscapes shown to her. Only when, years later (with the great famine striking the country by then), she attends a wedding party in which everyone looks skeletal, does she relate the lyrics of a popular song to the pictures she had seen before, which apparently suggests a continuity between folklore, music and history as cultural forms of passing on knowledge, traditions, and a whole nation's heritage:

> It was not of her own landscape – the earth beneath her feet – that the lone woman sang, but of a lost world that encompassed all losses. By the second verse five or six other women had joined in and the fiddler had begun to pick out the tune with his bow. Mary, knowing this to be a song about the vanished woods of Ireland, remembered the forest the other one had shown her, and the song pushed its way out of her mouth before she was aware that she had joined the chorus. (107-8).
>
> (...)
>
> There was great sorrow in this song and great joy, also, that the privilege of sorrow had not yet been cast from the people who sang it. The land they stood on had heard songs such as this before and it would hear them again, for it was the music that could not be starved out of it. The women knew that their bones would sing in the earth after their flesh had gone, and the men, who now joined them, knew that the song would make its way through the coming generations. (108)

Repeatedly invaded throughout the centuries and then colonised, exploited and deprived of its natural resources, by mid-nineteenth century Ireland was a country facing complete catastrophe, as the crop to which the island's poor population traditionally turned for its sustenance failed tragically. The Irish potato famine of the 1840s was one of the most – if not *the* most – appalling event of the Victorian era, having killed over a million people and driven as many more out of the country. Mike Cronin writes:

> The effects of the Great Famine are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend fully. The economic historians of Ireland have carried out much work that has calculated the cost of the famine in terms of deaths, the number of emigrants, changes in land-ownership patterns and so on, but the hardest story of all, the unquantifiable, is the human cost of the famine. In 1845, the population of Ireland stood approximately 8.5 million. By 1851, and the nominal end of the famine, the population had been reduced by over 2 million. Roughly half of this figure died from starvation and its accompanying diseases, while the remainder left Ireland's shores for a new life in a foreign land. Each and every one of those individuals who died or left Ireland had a story to tell, as did those that remained in Ireland and observed and lived through the devastating dislocation of the famine years.[26]

Away tells us one of such stories, as it is against this dramatic event in Ireland's history that Jane Urquhart sets the second half of the novel's first section. Typically, Urquhart chooses not to introduce this historical background in a plain, matter-of-fact writing style. She does it, instead, in her distinctive, beautiful poetical prose, conveying the sense of impending tragedy in paragraphs replete with metaphor and imagery (76-77).

Hard times put people to the test and Mary rises to the occasion, undergoing a new change. Having "enter[ed] the world again" (57) after her marriage to rational, down-to-earth Brian, who was charmed by her otherworldliness, Mary seems to reconnect with her former self and, as she does so, absent-minded Moira gives way to a resourceful young wife who refuses to let herself be defeated by circumstances, trying hard to put food on her family's table. Meanwhile, Brian seems to be less prepared to face up to such brutal reality and the process of change he undergoes appears to lead him in the opposite direction: he is seized by the despondency and the fatalistic pessimism often associated with the Irish character. His conversations with Father Quinn, "his closest friend" (31), had revealed him as the voice of scholarship and reason in the novel. It was, for instance, through him that the priest and the readers got the facts which explained rationally the origin of the dead young man and the tide of silverware and barrels of whiskey on Rathlin Island. But all his rationality seems to fail him when he realises it is no longer possible to fend off the colonial encroachments on a particularly sensitive area: the Irish children's education. The compulsory attendance of state schools would put an end to the so-called hedge-schools, like his own, which had been "started in the time of the Penal Laws, in response to oppression" (75), when Catholics were denied access to education. Profoundly regretting the option he had taken to teach his pupils Greek, Latin, and English, but not their own mother language, Brian becomes a tormented man and develops a very grim view of the Irish culture's future. While in the past he used to dismiss myth and the old tales as superstitious beliefs (because he took them for granted), he now becomes fully aware of their cultural relevance and, convinced that they will soon disappear, believes that the Irish culture itself is on the brink of extinction: "The old language will disappear forever, and all the magic and the legends. It's what they've always wanted, to be rid of us one way or another" (74). In this quotation Brian obviously uses the pronoun "they" to refer to the British, who, having dispossessed him and his fellow countrypeople of their own land centuries before, were about to deal the final blow, as Brian saw it.

Jane Urquhart is not militant in her exposure of the colonial exploitation in *Away*, but the background information is nonetheless made available to readers – in statements and personal opinions voiced by characters, in many cases – so that they can make their own judgements on the issue and understand the historical frame of the story. *Away* is not a postmodern historical novel and, on the whole, Urquhart's works do not cast doubt on the very possibility of knowing and representing the past, but to a certain extent they do show a postmodern influence in their option to adopt the perspectives of those groups traditionally left out of the historical record: women, workers, immigrants – in short, the marginalised and the downtrodden. So, for instance, when hunger hits hard both on Rathlin

Island and in the mainland, it is through Brian that readers first get a general picture of the catastrophe that is taking place all over Ireland:

> "Mary," Brian interrupted, "Mary, come back from whatever it is that you spend your time and let me tell you the news from Skibereen. Quinn says they are dying there like flies. That the ditches and hedges and gutters and streets are full of them – the corpses. And the workhouses packed with disease and thousands of people dying on the country roads that lead to them. There's nothing to be had and shiploads of grain leaving the ports everyday for England. Great God!" he shouted towards the sky framed by the window. "What will they do to us next?" (93)[27]

It is, therefore, not uncommon for characters (chiefly Brian and, later on, Eileen) to express their grievances and resentment, but the narrator's social commentary is to be read between the lines – Jane Urquhart does not seem to want her novel to degenerate into polemic and avoids the pitfalls of adopting a Manichaean view of her subject matter. Indeed, she appears to be quite convinced that the material she's dealing with in *Away* should not be addressed in black and white terms. If she had chosen to take a simplistic approach, she could have, for instance, cast the Sedgewick brothers as two ruthless, greedy, landlords so as to best represent the oppressive colonial system. In fact, readers wouldn't probably find it at all strange if she turned the two landlords into the villains of the story, presenting them as personifications of the faults and vices of the system they represented. But, instead, she portrays them as two likeable goofy brothers who are responsible for the only humorous moments in this otherwise rather solemn narrative. Osbert and Granville Sedgewick couldn't actually be further from the stereotypical Anglo-Irish landlords: they're not absentee, they're resident landlords, though Protestants they have "great affection" (42) for the local people's Catholic religion, they know their tenants by their names and take interest in their culture and folklore. Their warm feelings for the tenantry are fully requited as the two brothers are "as well loved by the peasantry as any pair of landlords" (41) in the whole of Ireland could ever hope to be. And yet the novel also makes it quite clear that though Osbert and Granville Sedgewick were born in the same land, live under the same sky and breathe the same air as their tenants, theirs is a completely different world which can hardly be made to connect with the local people's. Their leisurely days devoted to painting, writing or exploring the surrounding scenery cannot possibly have anything to do with ones spent by their tenants toiling in the fields to pay the rent and try to ensure their families' survival. These are, thus, two parallel worlds which never really intersect, not even when they appear to meet and make an attempt to communicate, because such attempts prove to be unsuccessful. This difficult communication between the colonised and the coloniser is fully illustrated in the episode where Mary and Osbert meet, at a time when the tenants' families are in dire straits for they are beginning to suffer the consequences of the crop failure. Mary is collecting seaweed to fertilise the fields while Osbert, not having to deal with such desperate situation due to his privileged status, is outdoors for an entirely different reason: collecting sea creatures for his new aquarium, which can only signal his detachment from the harsh realities of his tenant farmers' situation. The whole episode is loaded with meaning and symbolism, therefore providing an eloquent commentary on the unbridgeable gap between the Anglo-Irish landed gentry and the peasantry. It must, however, be read between the lines, as it is suggested rather than explicitly stated, thus tempting readers into making their own interpretations, which they inevitably will, despite Eileen's stern warning about making interpretations.

When Osbert sees Mary, he recognises her as the woman who is said to be "away," which immediately turns her into an object of curiosity for him. Their meeting exemplifies all the awkwardness and lack of communication which traditionally characterised the relations between the two social groups they represent. In this episode Mary comes across not as a speechless, alienated girl, but rather as an articulate, bright woman who forces Osbert to rethink the way he blithely disturbs the natural balance of the tidepool, which is here obviously used as a microcosm of the whole of Ireland, a country systematically messed with, exploited and impoverished by centuries of colonisation. And the representatives of the colonial rule are, at best, like Osbert and his brother: "fair-minded" (41) and friendly, but adopting a patronising attitude towards the local people. To Osbert, Mary is "like a child" (91) for the way she lays her enquiring eyes on the underwater world of the tidepool, although the episode reveals her as far wiser and more mature than him.

Despite seeing Ireland as "their country" (39), Osbert and Granville do not show any genuine will to promote or get involved in Ireland's much needed political, social and economic reform. Instead, they actually find inspiration in the Irish status quo, for it is in perfect tune with their romantic delight in ruins and decay: Granville, we learn, is unable to compose at all except when he is "in close proximity to some crumbling evidence of Ireland's former glory" (41). The novel also tells us about his "great sympathy for the cause of an independent Ireland" (41), pointing out the glaring inconsistencies in favouring such a sweeping political change:

> Granville had given little thought to what might become of his family holdings were this grand liberation to take place. It seemed as vague and unlikely to him as his stuffed puffins and demesne

> seemed eternal. It was the myth of the desire for freedom that appealed to him – all the longing that filled the very air. The ongoing sense of emotional trouble.
>
> (...)
>
> Resolution, he knew instinctively, would change the tone of the landscape, the faces of the cottiers, the melancholy of the people's music, and the passion and stoicism of their survival – in short, all that he and his ancestors had come to love. And so, without being aware, he supported this delicate balance of injustice and defiance on the one hand and sorrow and poetry on the other. (44)

Because Osbert shares his brother's love of myth and legend, he feels impelled to start a conversation with Mary, hoping "he would be able to glean some useful information for his folklore collection" (87). It's not the task that Mary is engaged in that interests him – many other women had gathered seaweed on that same spot before her, but "this man had been blind to them, her people" (87) – his only purpose is to ask her about her "daemon lover," which, in the end, he's not able to because the conversation takes a completely different direction from the one he had hoped it would. This episode shows us that Osbert's view of the Irish is highly stereotypical: Mary belongs to a people he associates with "[i]magination, superstition... but certainly not curiosity" (88). In other words, it seems the Irish are for him an inferior group of humans, not so developed intellectually as himself or his own people. Although his ancestors had been given states in Ireland in the early seventeenth century, two centuries later he is still foreign to that land and its people, which creates not just ethnic but also social and cultural barriers between him and Mary: "Everything about him had been manufactured somewhere else, in another country; everything, including his bones and the cellular construction of his flesh. She, however, had been built of the materials of this country" (90-1).

Away also suggests that Osbert's and Granville's very own idiosyncrasies – "the antics of themselves" (41), as the tenants put it – can be explained, to a large extent, by the education they received in their youth. Their father – there is never any reference to a female member of the Sedgewick family, which turns it into a representative example of patriarchy in its most basic form, while the O'Malley family is fundamentally a matriarchal one – was a man who seemed to do all he could to keep them in a protective cocoon, shielded from outside interference. He would go as far as hiring men from the community "to help him create suitably romantic and lengthy walks for his children" (41) and he would certainly encourage young Osbert and Granville to go on note-taking visits to the tenants, for whom "inventing new folklore" (41) became an unofficial duty, so as not to disappoint their masters. It's interesting to notice that by making up new legends and myths, the tenantry reciprocate the Sedgewick's patronising attitude towards the Irish and their culture with what appears to be an equally condescending response to the two brothers' collecting obsession.[28] Yet, despite showing great interest in those stories and legends, the Sedgewicks see them as merely fanciful items in a miscellaneous collection – they're described as "[d]edicated collectors of almost everything" (39) – and fail to grasp any resonant meaning or purpose beyond their immediate entertaining quality. To them, they're basically like an anemone taken out of a tidepool: isolated from their wider context and, therefore, making no real sense. The Irish people, however, perceived their folklore in a totally different manner. The beliefs, traditions, songs and stories handed down from generation to generation had become throughout the centuries a lot more than a creative way of filling in long evenings: they had actually taken on the role of survival tools. The sagas' mighty heroes, the fascinating legends, and the inspirational figures from Ireland's past provided the solace and sense of hope the Irish people could not draw from their everyday lives, which had to be led in extremely harsh conditions. Those narratives preserved the unity among those who turned to them for examples of bravery and resilience and, while doing so, they gave people a sense of collective identity by biding them together and asserting their cultural heritage as totally different from the coloniser's. So, in a sense, storytelling was as vital for these people as the meagre food they worked hard to put on their tables. In fact, so important was the keeping of the stories that the position of the storyteller and keeper of the tales in ancient Ireland was traditionally one of great prestige. Such highly privileged status was the preserve of the *fili*, or *file*. James MacKillop explains:

> The simple translation of "poet" is misleading, as much of the writing of the fili in his guise as senchaid [historian] was in prose, including sagas and romances, historical narratives, panegyrics, topography, genealogies, and specially satires, for which he was feared; The Modern Irish file, however, may be glossed as "poet." Although his calling was hereditary, each fili was attached to the household of a chief; being fili to the head of a clan was the prerogative of a particular family. Trained for at least twelve years in rigorous mental exercise, the fili might use an esoteric language, bérla na filed; his craft was filedetch. Some commentators have compared the status of the "fili" to the brahmin of India or to the Christian clergy of early modern Europe.[29]

MacKillop's explanation is illuminating on two levels. On the one hand, it helps us to understand the continuity between myth and religion (two prime examples of grand narratives) which can be clearly found in *Away*. If the fili's social status in Celtic, pre-Christian Ireland was somehow similar to the one enjoyed by the clergy in the Christian era, it is, thus, by no means an oddity that the Catholic priest in *Away*, father Quinn (a figure of authority like Father Gstir in *The Stone Carvers*), far from dismissing ancient myths as heretic, pagan superstitions, comes across as fully acquainted with those tales and even explains Mary's changed behaviour in their light:

> "Consider this," the priest replied [to Norah, Mary's mother]. "'They' leave an exact replica of that which they've taken, in its place. This girl is an exact replica. She is here but she's not. The word 'exact' is important. Every hair that's on her head is an exact replica of every hair that was on her head. Do you see it, Norah? There is nothing about her would have changed except that she is changed. The question is how to get her back. Sometimes it takes seven years. Sometimes they never come back. Sometimes they waste away. (26)

Of course, he only uses this kind of reasoning when he addresses his peasant parishioners, not when he's talking to rational Brian, for instance, which reveals him as well aware of the need to adapt his discourse to his interlocutors.

On the other hand, MacKillop's words also shed light on one of the novel's most symbolic moments, in which the Irish history is evoked in a very mystic register. Before leaving for Canada, Mary is once again visited by "the dark, darling one," (126) who shows her an extended sequence of pictures relating to the Irish past which make Mary see herself as part of that heritage – an heritage she will take with her when she leaves Ireland. The message seems to be that although people may be uprooted and forced to leave their homeland for various reasons, they are nonetheless able to take their cultural identity with them, which will, thus, not be lost. This is, as he shows her, made possible by the passing down of knowledge from the older to the younger generations and it becomes quite clear that it takes skilled teachers to open and explain the book of life and cultural heritage to their young learners (127). In this magical moment of cultural awareness, Mary also realises that she and all of those who share her lot are part of a much larger historical process which marches forward through cycles of great disruption and violence:

> Then she saw the world's great leavetakings, invasions and migrations, landscapes torn from beneath the feet of tribes, the Danae pushed out by the Celts, the Celts eventually smothered by the English, warriors in the night depopulating villages, boatloads of groaning African slaves. Lost forests. The children of the mountain on the plain, the children of the plain adrift on the sea. And all the mourning for abandoned geographies. (128)

After their first encounter on the beach, when the dying young man was wearing his torn sailor's clothes, there was no reference to his clothing in subsequent meetings, but the narrator tells us that on this occasion "he was clothed in the feathered coat of a poet" (128). He thus appears to take on the role of the ancient *fili,* the keeper of knowledge, the guardian of Irishness and of the Irish identity, making sure Mary will keep the stories, the traditions and the magic alive, even on the other side of the ocean. But he finishes with a dire prediction: "It will be, at times, as if it were less hardship to be sleeping in the graveyard of your native land, to be asleep underneath the stones that cover your island in the sea" (128). There were, indeed, very hard times ahead for those who, like Mary, had been selected to emigrate to Canada by their landlords. It should be noticed that even in this dramatic moment – or, rather, *especially* in this dramatic moment – the landed gentry had absolute control over the lives of the cottiers and smallholders: they drew up lists and decided who should go and who should stay, i.e., who should have a chance to live and who should be "left to work the fields until they dropped of starvation, harvesting food destined for the surfaces of British tables" (114). The long sea voyage, the appalling conditions in the coffin ships, the numbing weeks at the quarantine station at Grosse Island and the otherness of the landscape that awaited them are stages of that perilous adventure which are chronicled in *Away*.

Establishing parallels between the author's life or personal background and the fictional world he/she creates involves dangers which should be avoided, but in this case it seems inevitable (even irresistible) to see the O'Malleys' story as echoing the experience of migration undergone by Urquhart's Irish ancestors (the Quinn family whom she refers to in the book's dedication), who also emigrated to Canada in the famine years. Ireland is par excellence an emigrant society where migration has traditionally been accepted as a normal path for life and many of its greatest writers were emigrants themselves, though their experiences of migration and exile did not necessarily fit the ones shared by famine or economic migrants: Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Sean O'Casey... No wonder, then, that the theme of migration has been an inherently attractive one to Irish literature. However, Jane Urquhart's perspective is an entirely different one for she is not an immigrant herself – she was born out of the migrant experience. As such, she cannot write about direct, personal accounts of migration, but she nonetheless succeeds in providing us with a unique, sensitive representation of the mid-nineteenth-century exodus of the Irish to North America in *Away*. Like Urquhart, there are many authors of migrant ancestry all over the world whose works turn to the past and focus on their people's experience of dispossession, displacement and diaspora. Their exploration of the theme of migration is by no means inferior to the treatment it is given in works by first generation migrants, as King, Connell and White observe in the preface to *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*: "Some of the most telling accounts of the immigration experience are the work of authors who are not immigrants at all, but who are in some way the product of past migrations."[30]

In *Away* the O'Malleys' arrival in the new world is described in the second chapter of the novel's middle section. Quite fittingly, the family's youngest member, six-year-old Liam, becomes the main focaliser at this moment in the narrative: it is through his child's eyes that readers see the splendid white house by the Great Lake which will be his one day, the bustling port town where it stands, and the never-before-seen thick native forests. The boy's hazy memories of the family's departure from Ireland, of the nightmare sea voyage and of the long weeks spent at the quarantine station also offer us a brief but vivid glimpse of the squalor, suffering and death which immigrants to the new world had to come face to face with before setting foot on the promised land.

The family settled in Hastings County, Upper Canada, which was not only socially desolate, but also a hostile awe-inspiring place, as they first perceived it on arrival at the piece of uncleared land which awaited them there. The unfamiliar thick forest, the menacing animals and the strange noises turned the O'Malley's first night in the open into a frightening experience:

> But when the wagon deposited them under the outstretched arms of massive fir trees and disappeared into the further realms of the forest they were filled with dread, knowing themselves to be in a region where nothing at all was constructed and everything was engaged in haphazard growth. What with illness, quarantine, and then waiting out the winter freeze in Quebec, it had taken the family a year to reach this spot. Now they were terrified of the paradise they had imagined. (139-40)

> The first night the family huddled under a roof of cedar limbs on a mattress made from the boughs of the same tree. They lit the lantern, which had miraculously survived the ocean journey, the lake voyage, and the jolting of the wagon on the road to this spot.
>
> Soon their shelter was invaded by moths the size of the eagles they remembered from Ireland, and these frightened Liam to such an extent that Mary and Brian decided to abandon themselves, and him, to the impossible darkness. They lay, stiffly, side by side, eyes open against the inky black, certain that if they succumbed to sleep they would be torn to pieces by wild animals. Mary wept quietly and the boy pressed himself against her to absorb the comfort that her body gave.(142)

This episode is reminiscent of a similar account in a classic Canadian novel about pioneer life, *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), by Susanna Moodie, who also immigrated to Upper Canada in the nineteenth century, as mentioned above.[31] The Moodies' arrival at their new bush farm also filled the author with great dismay, although there was at least a roof to give herself and her company shelter from the rain:

> I dismounted and took possession of this untenable tenement. Moodie was not yet in sight with the teams. I begged the man [the carriage driver] to stay until he arrived, as I felt terrified at being left alone in this wild, strange-looking place. He laughed, as well he might, at our fears, and said that

> he had a long way to go and must be off (...). (...) Hannah [the servant girl] and myself were left standing in the middle of the dirty floor.
>
> The prospect was indeed dreary. Without, pouring rain; within, a fireless hearth; a room with but one window, and that containing only one whole pane of glass; not an article of furniture to be seen, save an old painted pine-wood cradle, which had been left there by some freak of fortune. This, turned upon its side, served us for a seat, and there we impatiently awaited the arrival of Moodie, Wilson, and a man whom the former had hired that morning to assist on the farm. (...) so we amused ourselves, while waiting for the coming of our party, by abusing the place, the county, and our own dear selves for our folly in coming to it.[32]

Marian and Brian's lot was far worse than the Moodies' for they had no house or hut, their land was yet to be cleared and there was no one around to give them a help. And yet, unlike *Roughing It in the Bush*, which as an autobiographical text straightforwardly voices its author's distress and concern, *Away*, at this stage, does not let readers know about any complaints expressed by the Irish couple. Only Mary's tears are referred to in the quotation above. Adopting Liam's perspective at this moment in the narrative is an ingenious device that, on the one hand, vividly conveys the sense of wonder and amazement with which the family perceived the strange new world they had just arrived in and, on the other hand, it is also a subtle way of keeping Mary's and Brian's thoughts unknown to readers, with very few exceptions (142). Finally, by virtually giving up omniscience at this crucial stage in the novel, the narrator is also making sure that Mary's decision to abandon the household will cause as much surprise to readers as to her own family: if her thoughts are not revealed to us, then we can only speculate about the reasons that made her leave her husband and children behind. Not that this development was very hard to predict. In fact, a series of hints had clearly indicated that this could be a possible outcome: Mary's entranced contemplation of the stream that ran by the cabin, her persistent questions to Brian about the rivers and lakes in the region and, most significantly, the remarkable coincidence that "the small lake below Madoc" (150) was called Moira.

Mary's disappearance was a severe blow to both Brian and Liam and it happened precisely when the latter was going through the oedipal phase in his relationship with his mother: he was very close to her, "loved her fiercely," (148) and was therefore extremely jealous when Eileen was born, not liking the idea of having to share his mother with a demanding crying baby. However, when Mary vanished without a trace, Liam's whole world changed and the seven-year-old boy was forced to grow up overnight. His sister soon became the centre of his universe – "She had become his, they would always be connected" (162) – thus filling in the space left empty by his mother, with whom Eileen had a lot more in common than just the physical appearance, as is made obvious as the novel unfolds. There aren't many representative examples of sisterhood in Urquhart's novels, but brother/sister relationships can be very strong, as illustrated by Liam and Eileen in *Away* and Tilman and Klara in *The Stone Carvers*.

The narrator clearly seems to want readers to ask themselves why Mary should walk out on her children when her baby daughter was only a few months old. Or why she should abandon the household when the family was prospering, when she and her husband "were like gods creating a universe" (153-4). Was the pull of the otherworld finally too magnetic for her to resist it? Was the call of the water too strong for her to ignore it? She had, indeed, always looked for water, living in close proximity to it, both in her homeland and in Canada, and spending long, introspective moments contemplating it. She had, after all, been born and lived most of her life by the waters of the Moyle where, according to the old Celtic story (one which, like Ovid's tales, also involves transformation and metamorphosis), the children of the Lir spent the second term of their nine-hundred-year punishment. Legend also has it that it was in the bay between Ballycastle and Fair Head (both locations feature in the novel) that Deirdre ("the best known figure from Celtic mythology in the world at large"[33]) and the sons of Uisneach landed from Scotland, fleeing their persecutors. Inspired by such dramatic setting, perhaps Mary saw herself as predestined to live out some mythical drama. Or did she misinterpret the "darling one" (110), like Eileen will misinterpret her lover a few years later? To Mary he is "the other one," (107-8) "the dark, darling one," (126) "the beloved other," (126) or "the dark other," (127) with words like "dark" and "other" obviously suggesting enigma and mystery. Before Mary leaves Ireland, he shows her that cultural heritage is kept alive by the passing down of skill and knowledge but she doesn't seem to translate his advice into concrete actions once she is in Canada. The novel does tell us that Mary taught Liam lullabies "in both Irish and English," (155) so that he could sing them to his sister, but, as she didn't (or couldn't) stay long enough to complete the task, those teachings had a minimal impact on the boy, who would grow up with his back turned to Irish heritage. By leaving home in order to go downstream and live beside Moira Lake all alone, she actually appears to be abandoning the mission she had been entrusted with, while Brian, in turn, is left to undertake it all by himself.

Seven years later – and the number seven is used here certainly not by mere chance, but surely for its symbolic and magical associations – Mary's family hears the story of the time she spent beside the lake, where the frigid temperatures eventually caused her death. Her story, as well as her frozen dead body, are brought to her family by a Native American, Exodus Crow, who arrives at the O'Malley's when Liam is reading Ovid, which appears to suggest that Mary has reached the final stage in her metamorphosis. Her otherworldliness now becomes self-evident: she comes across as a tragic heroine of a marvellous tale, or, in the simple words of her seven-year-old daughter, "a big doll" (174) whose beauty and serenity have been preserved by frost.

It is through (hi)storytelling that Mary and Exodus Crow become aware of the close affinities between their peoples. This multicultural encounter that breaks Mary's isolation in the forest (and which is, by far, the most significant one in the novel) is, thus, used by the novelist to draw a very clear parallel between the plight of the Irish and that of Native Americans, both of them having a first-hand knowledge of what it means to be colonised:

> "She [Mary] told me [Exodus Crow] that on the big island there were once forests as thick as those in this land but that the old kings and lords of England had cut down each tree until only bare hills were left behind."
>
> "That is true also," said Brian.
>
> Exodus leaned across the table and looked steadily at the Irishman. "And so I told her," he said, "that some white men had seized my people's land and killed many animals for sport and abused our women."
>
> The hands of the two men lay flat upon the table but their eyes never left the other's eyes face. "What did she say then?" asked Brian.
>
> When Exodus replied there was a break in his voice. "She embraced me and said that the same trouble stayed in the hearts of both our peoples." (184-5)

Such juxtaposition of the Irish with the Native Americans unites them in their experiences of dispossession and pits them against the same intruding coloniser who seizes the land and depletes its natural resources, condemning native populations to destitution and all kinds of inequities.

Brian, for his part, has a different way of dealing with the history of his people. Because he cannot find solace in mythical tales of resilience and self-sufficiency, he has to turn to other type of narratives whose more realistic approach to the subject suits his own bleak views on it. It is nonetheless clear that both in Mary's and in Brian's case the strong ties between nation and narration are quite evident, a connection which has been thoroughly discussed by authors such as Homi K. Bhabha or Geoffrey Benington. The latter writes that "we undoubtedly find narration at the centre of nation: stories of national origins, myths of founding fathers, genealogies of heroes. At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin."[34] Brian's heroes are obviously different from Mary's: they're not the protagonists of mythical tales, they're flesh and blood Irish political activists featured in newspaper stories. However, some of them, unlike two-dimensional characters, revise and change their ideas over time, alienating some of their supporters in the process. Such was the case with D'Arcy McGee, who started out as an enthusiastic advocate of revolutionary ideas, which he voiced in editorials and contributions to various newspapers, but whose political views were mellowed over the years, envisioning his homeland's future in totally different terms by the end of his career, which was abruptly cut short by assassination. Having emigrated to the US at seventeen, he then returned to Ireland in 1845 where he became associated with the Young Ireland movement and subsequently took a position in *The Nation*, the movement's newspaper, which, due to its wide distribution and unwavering editorial line, became pivotal in the development of Irish nationalism.[32] The failed rising of 1848 led to the suppression of the Young Ireland movement and put McGee in prison for a short while, after which he escaped to America. In 1857 his decision to leave the US and settle in Montreal marked a turning point in his career, as he soon got involved in the local politics actively and was elected to the Canadian parliament, in which his ability as a speaker became legendary. As he advanced in official prominence his views on his homeland's political situation underwent a complete change, which embittered Irish nationalists, for he no longer supported revolutionary movements or projects aiming at an independent Ireland. Quite the opposite: for him the future of Ireland should lie within the British empire (and, as he saw it, so should Canada's, since he was one of the leading political figures behind the confederation of the British colonies of North America as the Dominion of Canada in 1867). McGee's rejection of the nationalist rhetoric and political activism which he had been formerly associated with ultimately cost him his life, for when he was assassinated in 1868 it was generally believed that a Fenian conspiracy was involved. In *Away* Urquhart interweaves this event belonging to the sphere of public history with Eileen's private drama, since it is against this historical background that she painfully realises that her relationship with Aidan Lanighan is based on a huge misjudgement (or misinterpretation, as she sees it), for he is not the person she had taken him for. He actually ends up holding her responsible for McGee's assassination, but because the focus of the narrative lies elsewhere, it remains largely unaccounted for. As Herb Wyile observes, “Urquhart presents McGee almost exclusively from the ideologically overdetermined perspective of Irish patriots and refrains from providing a more conclusive portrayal of his assassination.”[36] As Urquhart herself states on the acknowledgements page, “[t]his book does not pretend to solve the mystery.”

Brian O’Malley’s reaction to McGee’s changing political position with respect to Ireland fully illustrates the broad response among Irish immigrants who, like himself, although living in a new land, were still consumed by old political wounds. He was deeply saddened when one day, having asked Eileen to read one of McGee’s speeches printed on a newspaper, he listened to “words such as ‘squalor’ or ‘illiteracy’ or ‘idleness’” (200) describing his people:

> When she finished she put the paper down on a stool beside the stove and turned to ask her father a question concerning his supper. It was only then that she saw that he had been weeping.
>
> “Such betrayal,” he was whispering. “And he an Irish Catholic himself. Such betrayal.”
>
> After that he never mentioned McGee’s name again. (200)

Brian comes across as a man for whom words speak louder than anything else, which explains his intense disappointment at McGee’s speech. He’s a man who treasures words and knowledge and his discussions with father Quinn, back in Ireland, about the contents of the volumes of the Encyclopaedia Britannica they shared clearly attest to it. In fact, as the novel unfolds, we realise he doesn’t even seem to believe that human action can have any serious impact on the Irish situation. Instead, he appears to look forward to some kind of providential justice which is obviously out of human reach: ”’For freedom comes from God’s right hand and needs a godly train,’ he sang as he strode into view [coming home from school]. ‘And righteous men must make our land a nation once again’” (202). He therefore appears to be sceptical of the pertinence of violent political activism if his reaction to the Fenian invasions, whose ultimate goal was to liberate Ireland, is to be taken as representative of his overall attitude towards armed struggle. As he listens to Eileen reading the proclamation of the failed invasion, his response seems to indicate that, although he supports its ideals, he disapproves of the means used to achieve them and regrets the consequences of the Fenian agitation: “’For this they took away my children,’ Brian said. Then he walked into the back room and flung himself down on his bed” (203). His teaching post had been a source of immense joy and fulfilment – which clearly distinguishes him from the history teacher in Swift’s *Waterland* – because “the children loved him” (202) and gave him energising feedback in class. Being a teacher didn’t obviously allow Brian to change history but it did give him the chance to somehow rewrite it or (*retell* it), to approach it from an unofficial angle:

> At the school Brian began to teach an entire different history of the British Empire than the one outlined by Egerton Ryerson in his prospectus for Upper Canadian schools. Speaking in the confidential tone of a man imparting wisdom by a fireside, he told of the land seizures which preceded the plantation of English and Scottish Protestants in Ulster. Turning slowly from the board as if his body were an old hinge, he would glare out from under the bushy brows at what was to him now a blurred sea of small faces and demand that some young scholar recite the rights that were denied Catholics in Ireland during the eighteenth century at the time of the Penal Laws. (201)

So vital were these history-telling sessions for Brian that shortly after their abrupt end, he apparently willed himself to death, as if he had nothing else in life to look forward to.

Eileen shared the intensity of her father's sorrows over the sad history of his native country. She soon developed a passionate interest for Irish affairs, becoming an avid reader of the newspapers produced within the Irish community in Canada, and for years they opened for her a window into the world of politics with which she would later have a brief but traumatising involvement. However, Eileen approaches these matters from an angle which differs from her father's: with her, the Irish identity seems to be firmly placed under the sign of myth. Described as a replica of her mother, Eileen has not only Mary's perfect white skin and flame-coloured hair, but also her extreme sensitivity, mystical aura and otherworldliness. She, therefore, seems to be predestined to relive her mother's story of love and obsession for a *daemon* lover. When Aidan Lanighan enters the narrative, it becomes obvious that she will, indeed, do so. He dazzles her with his dance, which she believes (as well as everybody else) he will present to McGee as a petition, as a heart-felt plea for the politician not to turn his back on his people, not to betray them. She sees him as embodying all the stories that she had been told about Ireland and it doesn't take long for her to imagine herself and Lanighan as protagonists of mythical sagas:

> He was like Oisín in the land of the forever young; righteousness in his anger, the memory of a wronged brotherhood still hot in his brain.
>
> "My people," she whispered, thinking of how her father had explained Oisín, Finn, and the Fianna to her. "Our people."
>
> She wanted to be like Deirdre, running wild in the woods in the intimate company of doomed brothers. "All stories," her father had told her, "are born of sorrows." (...) She wanted the power, the collusion, the potential for tragedy. (298)

Deirdre, or Deirdre of the Sorrows, had been an inspirational figure to Mary as well, for she could see parallels between herself and the mythical heroine whose overwhelming love for Noise forced her to hide with him and his brothers in the forest (184). As for Eileen, who craves for drama and tragedy in her life, she probably sees Deirdre as the tragic heroine par excellence. It’s interesting to notice that Eileen should name her daughter Deirdre and, despite the prophetic name, the girl would grow up to be a woman who, unlike her mother and grandmother, did “not lean towards extremes” (355).

With respect to Oisín, MacKillop tells us that “[s]tories of Oisín’s visit to the Otherworld with a beautiful woman are widespread in the oral traditions of Ireland and Gaelic Scotland,”[37] which indicates that not only is Eileen investing Lanighan with mythical nature, she’s also projecting herself into his story as well. Yet, though she intuitively senses he is part of a “brotherhood,” she’s not wise enough to realise that precisely because of that she will not be admitted into his patriarchal world. Unlike the beautiful woman in Oisín’s story, it seems Eileen doesn’t merely *visit* the otherworld, she *lives* in it. She herself says so when she comes back home from her tragically failed foray into the world of politics, feeling rejected and despised by Lanighan: “I live on an otherworld island” (346). This is a phrase she borrows from Lanighan himself: “It was all play for you [Eileen], wasn’t it [...]. All some kind of dream... some kind of goddamed otherworld island” (343). To Esther she says in her old age: “I’ve been away all my life” (351).

Stories often take us away to other places, to other times. Urquhart’s novels, for instance, do that very successfully. Eileen, however, didn’t just let herself be carried away by the well-known myths of the Irish oral tradition, she went further than that, “translating from myth to life the songs her father had taught her” (296). It, thus, seems that the novel intends to make it quite clear that although myths, legends and songs can have an energising power over the people whose cultural heritage they are part of, it is nonetheless crucially important to be aware of the pitfalls involved in seeing them as literal models for real life. Eileen failed to realise this and her blend of Celtic myth and Irish nationalism proved disastrous. Introduced to readers as a replica of her mother, Eileen’s life ends up presenting a variation on the state of being away, thus replicating Mary’s story of enchantment and withdrawal from the physical world around her. In fact, the recurrent use of the word “replica” throughout the novel adds to the notion of repetition, which is so intrinsic to this narrative. These women’s private (hi)stories repeat themselves with such exactness that they seem to be destined to go through the same cycle of events, with minor changes, in three different generations. Taken together, the lives of the O’Malley women, therefore, appear to be providing us with a peculiar – extreme, perhaps – example of Kristeva’s notion that the female subjectivity is associated with a cyclical time, not with the linear time of politics and history.[38] Even the mysterious male whose arrival marks a turning point in these women's lives seems to be the same individual in three different reincarnations. In each case the physical description focuses on the same three distinctive features: green eyes, pale face and dark curls. Unlike what is stated by the Irish triad that Urquhart uses as the novel's epigraph, and which structures the three-part narrative, these men's trace on the O'Malley women is anything but short-lived, which can only indicate that Urquhart is giving the triad (or, at least, its final third) an ironical sense. Mary's, Eileen's and Esther's lives are profoundly shaped and changed by their relationships with their *daemon lovers*, who, in the end, come across as selfish, insensitive, narcissistic men who are clearly not worthy of these women's love and devotion. For obvious reasons, this does not apply to Mary's drowned sailor, but Aidan Lanighan, in particular, strikes us as a rather cold, opaque man whose thoughts remain out of the narrator's reach throughout the narrative, as his true character and intentions are concealed until the narrative's denouement. He uses Eileen, misleads her into thinking that he is indeed the man she takes him for – he tells Eileen: "McGee was our only hope. He had all our love and he never understood it" (315) – and, in the end, outwitted by two nationalists he was supposed to keep an eye on, he lays the blame for McGee's assassination on Eileen. She did, in fact, jump to conclusions and act as a gullible girl, idealising Aidan and modelling him on the warriors of the myths she had been familiarised with as a child. However, as she looks back on her life, she is rather harsh on herself, judging her assumptions and attitudes too severely.

As befits a woman leaning towards extremes, the punishment she imposes on herself is equally severe: she asks her brother and sister-in-law to raise her baby daughter as their own, severs the links with the outside world and shuts herself up in a house full of memories, thus bringing to mind Miss Havisham, the eccentric old lady in Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Because Esther is warned in her youth against the dangers of being away, she is introduced on the novel's opening page as "the most subdued of the extreme women" (3). By telling Esther the history of the O'Malley family – and, particularly, of its women – Eileen wants to prevent her from going through the same painful experience which marked her own life and she stresses her point very strongly: "'For God's sake,' she had yelled, 'stay where you are, be who you are.' She had thumped the floor with her cane, 'Try to understand, but try not to interpret'" (12). Esther obeys her grandmother and lives all her life in Loughbreeze Beach. She's not like Mary, who would look for her "darling one" in the waters and she's not like Eileen, either, who ran away from home at seventeen to look for Aidan Lanighan in the watery streets of Montreal. Esther stays behind in the old house by the Great Lake where, for many years, she leads the life of a successful farmer. But she has by no means more control over her romantic affair with her fisherman lover than Mary and Eileen had over their relationships. His entry into Esther's life hauntingly echoes the drowned sailor's mysterious arrival on the shores of Rathlin Island, which, once again, strengthens the pattern of repetition referred to above:

> He was drawn to her shore by the threat of a storm [...]. He anchored his boat in the relative calm of her bay with a gale coming up and waves slamming against the jetty to which he swam. Esther, lighting the first evening lamp, was made aware of his presence as the sound of his footsteps grinding through beach stones gradually overcame the sound of the turf. When she opened her door she was unsurprised by his dark curls, his pale hand and his bright green eye. (353-4)

Afterwards, the sailor returns now and then to stay with Esther, eventually stopping coming altogether, jilting her. Esther realises her fisherman must be "fishing other waters" (354) by then, as assumption she makes dispassionately: Eileen's story had prepared for this. Her lover reminds us of *The Underpainter*'s Austin Fraser, an emotionally hollow man who is unable to make emotional commitments.

As the years go by, decay and ruin take hold of everything around Esther: the house, the property, and the lake itself, which becomes no longer fishable shortly after the green-eyed sailor stops coming to Loughbreeze Beach. In a narrative in which water plays such a symbolic part, a polluted lake can only be regarded as a bad omen, suggesting, perhaps, absence of life and fertility. Coincidentally – or not so – Esther is childless and is, therefore, the last of the line. But for her the need for storytelling is just as urgent and overwhelming as it was for her ancestors who had children to tell their (hi)stories to. "You are your memories," people say, and Esther knows this very well, telling a long memory narrative that will keep her awake through the night. She comes across as a kind of Scheherazade telling a story to fill in a long night – her last night – and put off her death for just a few hours. Outside it is the month of June, when nature is supposed to be in full bloom and dazzle us with its beauty. This is not the case with present-day Loughbreeze Beach, though. It's not just the decaying farm buildings and equipment, it's the aggression that's being relentlessly perpetrated against nature by the cement company, which virtually keeps Esther besieged in her own house. The sheer materialism of contemporary society is, therefore, closing in on Esther, disregarding the environment in its ruthless pursuit of profit. The novel, thus, ends in a bleak tone and its final paragraph is clearly a lament for a wounded land which is being changed beyond recognition and deprived of its cultural and historical humus. The Canadian landscape, it seems, has come under an assault which is not significantly different from the one which was launched on Ireland generations ago. It’s then appropriate that the last of the mysterious, ethereal O’Malley women is about to leave a world which has definitely nothing in common with the magical undertones of the story she has to tell. Sadly, this is a world in which economic progress and the need to meet rising material living standards are reducing personal histories to dust: “Under the glare of artificial light the fossilised narratives of ancient migrations are crushed into powder. The scream of machinery intensifies” (356).

Notes

1 G.W. Friedrich Hegel. *The Philosophy of History*. 1830-31. Trans. John Sibree. New York: Dover Publications, 1956: p. 111.

2 Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975 (1973): pp. 89-90.

3 Tamsin Spargo. “Introduction: Past, Present and Future Pasts.” *Reading the Past*. Ed. Tamsin Spargo. Basingstoke (Hampshire): Palgrave, 2000: p. 4.

4 Hayden White. *Metahistory*. p. 52

5 *Ibid*. pp. 48-9.

6 E.H. Carr. *What is History?* 1961. London: Penguin, 1990: p. 8.

7 “History and Historiography.” Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2005. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761555707_2/History_and_Historiography.html.

8 Hayden White. *Metahistory*. pp 1-2.

9 E.H. Carr. *What is History?* p. 12.

10 Peter Burke. “Overture. The New History: Its Past and its Future” *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Ed. Peter Burke. London: Polity Press, 2001: p. 6.

11 Graham Swift. *Waterland*. 1983. London: Picador, 2002: pp. 61-2.

12 *Ibid*.

13 *Ibid*. p. 40.

14 Donna Rosenberg. *Folklore, Myths, and Legends: A World Perspective*. Lincolnwood (Illinois): NTC Publishing Group, 1997: pp. xxiv-xxv.

15 Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Myth and Meaning*. 1978. London and New York: Routledge, 2003 (2001): pp 36-7.

16 Marie Vautier. *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 1998: p. 8.

17 *Ibid*. p. 39.

18 Margaret Atwood. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002: p. xx (italics in the text).

19 *Ibid*.

20 Marilyn Snell. “Interview with Margaret Atwood.” *Mother Jones*. July/August 1997 Issue. Accessed via the Internet at http://www.motherjones.com/arts/qa/1997/07/visions.html

21 Jane Urquhart. *Away*. 1993. London: Bloomsbury, 2002: p. 4. All further page references are given in the text.

22 A dire warning to those venturing to offer their interpretation of this novel...

23 James MacKillop. "Ériu." *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004 (1998): p. 192.

24 Laura Vasconcellos. *Histórias da Mitologia Celta. Lisboa: Guimarães Editores,* 2001: p. 29.

25 Herb Wyile. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2002: p. 201.

26 Mike Cronin. *A History of Ireland*. Basingstoke (Hampshire): Palgrave, 2001: p. 135.

27 It should be added, with respect to the Irish exports of grain in the famine years, that though Brian's words are in tune with the contemporary perceptions, historians who later on studied this period revised that notion, as Cecil Woodham-Smith explained in her thorough study of the Irish famine:

> At first sight the inhumanity of exporting food from a country stricken by famine seems impossible to justify or condone. Modern Irish historians, however, have treated the subject with generosity and restraint. They have pointed out that the corn grown in Ireland before the famine was not sufficient to feed the people if they had depended on it alone, that imports must be examined as well as exports: in fact, when the famine was as its worst four times as much wheat came into Ireland as was exported, and in addition almost 3,000,000 quarters of Indian corn and 1,000,000 cwts. of Indian meal.

Cecil Woodham-Smith. *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*. 1962. London: Penguin, 1991: pp. 75-6.

28 This obsession, so to speak, was perfectly in tune with the spirit of the age – the nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in folklore and mythology throughout Europe, and this was particularly evident in Ireland.

29 James MacKillop. "Fili." *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. p. 223.

30 Russell King, John Connell and Paul White. "Preface." *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*. Eds. R. King, J. Connell and P. White. London and New York: Routledge, 1995: p. xi.

31 Interestingly, Lt. John Moodie, Susanna's husband, was appointed sheriff of the county of Hastings in 1839.

32 Susanna Moodie. *Roughing it in the Bush; or, Life in Canada*. 1852. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1989: p. 91.

33 James MacKillop. "Deirdre." *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. p. 132.

34 Geoffrey Bennington. “Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation.” *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London and New York: Routledge, 1995 (1990): p. 121.

35 *The Nation* brought the rich Irish historical and cultural past into focus and turned it into a subject of popular interest and concern, an entirely new practice since these matters were hitherto associated with the elites only. Robert Kee writes:

> Articles on Irish antiquities, Irish music, Irish art, Irish ballad poetry, Irish scenery, Irish ethnology and the Irish language [...] appear[ed] week after week in the columns of *The Nation* and always related to the cult of nationality. A few Irish Protestant patriots of the eighteenth century had shown an interest in Irish antiquities and the Irish language as part of their national consciousness, as had some of the radicals of the 1790s. But such studies had been the prerogative of scholars and amateur specialists even though spoken Irish was still the vernacular for almost half the population.

Robert Kee. *The Green Flag: A History of Irish Nationalism*. 1972. London: Penguin, 2000 (1989): p. 197.

36 Herb Wyile. *Speculative Fictions*. p. 208

37 James MacKillop. “Oisín.” *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. p. 355.

38 This notion is developed by Julia Kristeva in “Women’s Time” (1979), one of her most influential essays.

3. Loss, Grief and Catharsis – a female experience of the Great War in *The Stone Carvers*

There's an enduring fascination with the Great War. Nearly ninety years after the armistice it is still impossible not to be impressed and disturbed by its unprecedented scale of destruction and extremely high cost in terms of lives and wounds (historians estimate that up to ten million people were killed and another twenty million were wounded) and by the devastating effects on the lives of those who lost their beloved ones on the battlefield. The war radically reshaped the political map of Europe and brought about relevant social changes, but its contemporaries – especially those who experienced it firsthand – were, above all, overwhelmed by its horror and carnage, as clearly shown by the writings of the so-called war poets. In the English-speaking world, modern day perceptions of the First World War are, to a great extent, still shaped by the work of the poets, writers and artists of the trenches, who seemed to speak so eloquently for those who are often called "the lost generation." From the heady patriotism of the "War Sonnets" (1914) by Rupert Brooke, to the bleak, despondent tone of the harsher poems written by later voices such as Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, or Edmund Blunden, the war poets' body of work, taken collectively, chronicles a change of mood from an initial youthful idealism to a subsequent disillusionment and hopelessness. Their writings reveal to us their innermost thoughts and feelings and take us into a world of chaos, permanent discomfort, injury and death well beyond what any person living in the early twentieth century had believed possible. Their powerful language and imagery was capable of vividly capturing the cruel realities of war, and even when read by a modern public they can make an event of almost a century ago come hauntingly and disturbingly alive. As the creators of a rich cultural heritage, the poets of the Great War have stood the test of time and remain well-known and highly esteemed today.[1] In fact, for many years, it seemed that their powerful and influential body of work was the only one dealing with the shattering experience of the Great War, thus overshadowing other voices which remained forgotten and neglected for a long while, namely those of the female poets and writers of the First World War period. For decades their work was completely ignored as if women's writings were somehow unfit to articulate the pain, the suffering and the insanity of war. This marginalisation of women's perspective was obviously rooted in the traditional belief that war is a male territory and should be therefore chronicled and written about by male authors. So, despite the relevant contributions of women writers like Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and other voices rescued from oblivion not so long ago, one inevitably gets the impression that there is a deficit in reflections and accounts of the wartime experience from women's point of view. Some of the male writers themselves levelled serious accusations against women, 'conspiring' to discredit the female emotional and social statements on the tragedy of war. In fact, because the wartime period produced the circumstances that enabled women to liberate themselves from old restrictions, take on new social roles, have access to professions previously available to men alone and ultimately gain the right to vote, an undisguised misogynistic resentment pervades some of the male writings of the time. Their authors suggest that women were extraneous to the horror taking place around them and that, furthermore, they were actually the ones who stood to gain from men's sacrifices on the battlefield.[2] In *Sex Changes*, volume two of *No Man's Land*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write:

> In poems by such representative contemporary artists as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and D. H. Lawrence the unmanning terrors of combat lead to an anger directed specifically against the female, as if the Great War itself were primarily a climatic episode in a battle of the sexes that had already been raging for years.[3]

But the Great War didn't only inspire its contemporaries – it has fuelled the imagination and creativity of many artists and writers throughout the years. Perhaps because of the inspirational figures of the famous (and tragic) male war poets and their work, the fictional recreations of the period have, by and large, tended to confirm it as belonging to male protagonists, therefore presenting it from men's point of view. Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* (1971), Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* (1993) and Pat Barker's trilogy of the Great War – *Regeneration* (1971), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), and *The Ghost Road* (1995) – are illustrative examples of modern fictional texts which deal with the subject of the First World War adopting the point of view of those who fought in it, recreating life in the trenches, exploring the combatants' anxieties, emotional and psychological scars, and their discussions and reflections about the devastation taking place around them.

Jane Urquhart shares these authors' fascination with WW I. In an online interview following the publication of *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart explained:

> "[I was born] to parents who had not only participated in the Second World War but had also been children during the First World War. My mother, in particular remained fascinated by Canada's involvement in the latter conflict [...].
>
> (...)

> Later in her life – and indeed up until the present – she has collected books, letters and other memorabilia associated with the First World War. I learned a great deal about the First World War from her and, as I grew older, shared her fascination.[4]

In the same interview she stated that having “explored the question of the psychological implications of men and women returning from the First World War” in *The Underpainter* (1997), it soon became clear when she completed it that she “was not finished with the First World War,” thereby concluding: “that book was my path into *The Stone Carvers*.” *The Underpainter* is the only one of Urquhart’s novels written in the first person (a narrative device she uses recurrently in her collection of short stories *Storm Glass*). The story is told from the point of view of Austin Fraser, an American painter who in his old age looks back on his life and art, remembering the people whose lives are intertwined with his memories. Two of them are George and Augusta, both of them Canadian shell-shock victims of WW I. The war is a central event in the novel but it’s not experienced firsthand by Austin, who neither fought in it nor lost anyone in the conflict. In *The Stone Carvers* Urquhart once again tells personal stories against the powerful backdrop of the First World War, exploring the impact of sweeping historical events on ordinary lives. Extending backwards and forwards in time, the story spans three generations and its setting moves from Ontario to the postwar battlefields of Vimy, France, and back again to Canada. Unlike *The Underpainter, The Stone Carvers* is a novel told predominantly from a female perspective, presenting us with a woman’s experience of the war. Its main focaliser is Klara Becker, who as the novel opens is introduced as a spinster in her late thirties leading a solitary existence on her farm in the German-settled village of Shoneval. Early on in the story readers are told that Klara had “the possession of something that only a very few spinsters have: independence and a past.”[5] This is therefore a narrative that starts in *medias res* – important events took place in Klara’s youth which are still shaping her present and which will impact on the way the story will unfold. The phrase “to have a past,” when applied to a woman usually means that she was once (twice, ...) involved in a love affair which, for a variety of reasons, went wrong. These expectations are confirmed when a few pages further on in the novel it is revealed that twenty years before, in the summer of 1914, Klara had a brief but intense romance with a young Irishman, Eamon O’Sullivan, or “Silent Irish.” His silence was a source of deep anger and frustration on Klara’s part, as she wanted him to speak and communicate with her: “Why do you never speak? Say something!” (42) On this particular point *The Stone Carvers* brings to mind “Italian

Postcards," a short story included in *Storm Glass* in which the central character, a woman named Clara, reads about her namesake saint, Chiara of Assisi, the female friend of Saint Francis. Clara is extremely angry with Francis for the way he denied Chiara the attention and communication that Clara believes she longed for. At the suggestion of her grandfather, *The Stone Carvers*' protagonist was named after the Italian saint (29) and, interestingly, Eamon shared with St. Francis a fondness for animals and a special gift to communicate with them – he once told Klara he could talk to birds (82-3) – as well as an iron will and strong determination to pursue self-imposed goals. Shocking his wealthy family, Francis discarded the fine clothes his social status required him to wear and determined to dress as a beggar, forever living a life of poverty and self-sacrifice, as the (hi)story goes. Eamon, for his part, put on his red waistcoat, which he had asked Klara to make for him, prophetically announcing that he needed it for his funeral (81), and decided to go off to war, despite the disapproval of both his family – his father did not want his son to go against their Irish heritage by fighting for England (138) – and Klara, who "would never forgive his determined act of truancy" (40). Eamon's entry into Klara's life inspired contradictory feelings on her. On the one hand, she seemed to resent it because she felt Eamon had shattered the contentment and tranquillity she had experienced hitherto and, clearly unprepared to deal with the inner turmoil that resulted from her intimate sexual relationship with Eamon, she blamed him for having ushered her "into a heated adult world where men and women clutched at each other, wrestled, collapsed on the floor" (131-2). On the other hand, that same adult world introduced Klara to a wealth of new emotions and sensations she had never experienced before. Her affair with Eamon awoke her sensuousness and sexuality and gave her a knowledge of both her own body and that of the opposite sex which she did not have. It was one "intense, confusing season" (30) of self-discovery and secret nightly visits which confronted Klara with entrenched beliefs and taboos instilled by social mores and religion:

> "She would remember this forever, this act they called sin, her body boneless, some new vine flowering in her veins. (130)
>
> (...)
>
> Would she confess this sin? Would Eamon? She didn't want to whisper about it in the dark of the confessional, and she didn't want Eamon whispering about it either. (131)

The notion of sin was one that interested Klara, who was particularly curious about the sentimental lives of saints:

> Despite her tidy appearance and orderly conduct, Klara had wanted her grandfather or, failing that, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception to tell her everything they knew and anything they could imagine about the lives of the saints her grandfather carved, particularly about their lives before sainthood – moments of sin especially fascinated her. She suspected, for instance, that her namesake, the famous Chiara of Italy, had been in love with saint Francis, and had left her parents' comfortable home in order to follow him, and that the many pious works of her strict, contemplative life would have been enacted as bids for his approval and affection. (99)

The nature of Klara's relationship with Eamon was, however, quite different from the ascetic, platonic one she believed Chiara of Assisi had with Francis. With Eamon by her side, she was able not to dwell on the eventual moral consequences or implications of their relationship, but once she was told about his decision to enlist, the sense of guilt which is so distinctive of the catholic religion as well as the shame associated with sex and desire took hold of her, making it quite difficult for her to reconcile her memories of the affair with the austere principles of her background (139-140). She felt she had been betrayed not only by Eamon, but also by "her own passion, this animal that paced around the edges of her character" (140), which she perceived as "a heavy brute, tenebrous, unmovable, weighted by dread" (140). Overwhelmed by the pain it caused her and filled with a deep sense of loss over Eamon's departure and subsequent death, Klara spent the next two decades repressing the memories of that romance as well as her own body and womanliness. After a summer when "it seemed that every one of Klara's senses had opened to the light of the long, long days" (120), she went through twenty numbing years of winter, emotionally shutting herself up and struggling to forget about young Klara and the unhappy ending story of her first love. These extreme withdrawals are not uncommon in Jane Urquhart's female protagonists, who, finding themselves rejected, betrayed, or deserted by their lovers, abandon themselves to grief in ways that male characters don't. In Urquhart's novels (with the clear exception of *The Whirlpool*) men's lives often strike us as a lot broader than women's as they appear to have dreams and goals of their own to pursue outside their romantic relationships. Women, for their part, devote themselves to their men so obsessively that they appear to end up suffocating them, which combined with what they perceive as an inborn male urge to walk away, eventually makes men leave. Klara's personal experience made her well aware of this:

> Only the old men could be counted upon to stay, wanting warmth and comfort from women. The young were bred to run away, to flee toward that which was not easily known: the open road, a piece of machinery, toward anything but the disclosure women demanded of them. Even her father, as a young man, had left his fields at dusk, driven in the direction of the house by various forms of hunger. And once there, Klara now suspected, he would have resented his surrender to the tyranny of the feminine, so that each morning his resumption of duty was an act of escape.

> It was all one long, exhausting game of hide and seek. (152)

It is against the background of this perpetual game of hide and seek and rigidly defined gender roles and identities that Klara interpreted what she perceived as Eamon's escape and her inability to do the same: "She felt utterly defenceless in the face of his desertion, permanently fixed within the dimensions of a house. And all he had to do was walk away. Something she would never be able to do" (142). Klara felt bound to a domesticity which had no claims on Eamon, and therefore considered herself to be at an obvious disadvantage. It was as if he was naturally freer and, thus, able to leave his home country, his family and – most notably – herself behind for what she took to be a childish whim. Indeed, Eamon's single-minded determination to go off to war in order to fulfil his dream of flying an aeroplane and, afterwards, bring it home and make everybody proud epitomises the innocence and naïvety Philip Larkin would evoke eloquently decades later in his celebrated poem "MCMXIV" (1960).

Readers are told that Eamon was the only boy in his village who enlisted for war service. Although both Eamon O'Sullivan and Shoneval are fictional creations,[6] they nonetheless seem to be used in the novel as examples of opposite responses to the conflict: Eamon eagerly, and innocently, joining the Canadian forces and the village, as a whole, opposing the very idea of war. The contemporary (and omniscient) narrator's voice comments quite straightforwardly on this, apparently intending to dispute some ideas and notions conveyed by the historical record:

> No one in Shoneval wanted to enlist. This reluctance would be later attributed to the German background of the village by a simplistic but effective propaganda machine designed to make people in Canada increasingly aware of racial and ethnic differences. The truth was that nobody wanted to enlist because they had spent the Sunday afternoons of their childhoods listening to grandparents count their blessings – the most important of which was freedom from armed conflict. Large portions of the elder population had left behind war-torn Bavaria in their youths precisely for this reason. Even more had left behind the constant deadly squabbles over Alsace. (136-7)

It appears that Urquhart is here trying to somehow rewrite history as a healing process, unwilling to probe into wounds time has managed to close. It is, nonetheless, a fact that in wartime Canada those who had German background (together with all the others coming from the countries that were part of the central powers) were looked upon with suspicion and mistrust, thus becoming prime targets of discrimination, as Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock remind us:

> Canada's entry into the war in 1914 served to exacerbate intense and long-festering prejudices against European immigrants, especially those from countries with which Canada was now at war.

> The widespread patriotic endorsements of Canada's involvement in the Imperial cause were matched by sweeping calls for the suppression of the rights and liberties of enemy aliens.
>
> (...)
>
> Those classified as enemy aliens included almost 400,000 persons of German origin, more than 100,000 immigrants from Austro-Hungarian Empire, close to 5,000 people from the Turkish Empire, and several hundred Bulgarians. While many of these immigrants had been the subject of animosity before the war, the level and intensity of public hostility towards them reached new heights during these years.[7]

Jane Urquhart chose not to highlight these facts in *The Stone Carvers*. The novel engages with history in a very open and direct manner, foregrounding the personal dramas and tragedies brought on by traumatic public events, and it seems very obvious that the writing of this narrative involved making choices. (But, then, the writing of any kind of narrative – including the writing of history – inevitably implies making choices.) The narrator's voice is therefore perceived by readers as a not at all timid or weak one, but as quite clear and assertive, instead. *The Stone Carvers'* readers are, thus, provided not only with the background information Urquhart – or, more technically appropriate, the narrator – thinks they need to contextualise the story, but also with personal interpretations and comments, which are articulated very consistently throughout the novel not in a matter-of-fact, news-reporting style, but rather in Jane Urquhart's signature poetic language, as exemplified below:

> All over Ontario boys were being worshipped and wept over as they covered themselves in khaki and marched toward a collection of similar brick train stations, part of a massive reverse migration. As if engaging in an act of revenge, Europe had demanded that the grandsons of the impoverished hordes that had left her shores a few generations before now cross the ocean to mingle their flesh with the dust of their ancestors. Blanketed in flowers, surrounded by song, accompanied by pipes and drums, young men departed from farms and factories, offices and banks, schools and churches as if enchanted, their faces smiling and oddly vacant. (152-3)

The picture that is given here of the general mobilisation across Ontario is not fractured by the ethnic dissent Kelley and Trebilcock tell us about, suggesting, instead, a mature national unity among Canadians. This is not to say that Jane Urquhart is an author who ignores the diversity of ethnic communities that make up the Canadian mosaic. On the contrary, they feature very strongly in her works, as illustrated by *The Stone Carvers*, whose cast of characters includes diasporics from Germany, Italy and Ireland. And it's only fair to say that the novel does show that these people sometimes found it difficult to win social acceptance, suffering prejudice as a consequence. For example, Eamon feels inferior on account of his background, which he assumes to be the reason for Klara's apparent distance and indifference: "Was it his Irishness, Eamon would now wonder, that had set Klara against him, the telltale trace in his voice? Nothing in him wanted to remind her of his origins in the beginning and this, plus his shyness, had made it almost impossible for him to speak at all" (155-6). Eamon's initially stubborn silence, when explained, thus turns out to be rooted in his fear that his words, pronounced with the Irish accent, would constantly remind Klara of his Irish ancestry, which was a source of embarrassment for him. Fighting in the war could, therefore, bring him the approval and the respect he craved for. However, the circumstances in which Eamon left his village were completely different from the emotional leave-takings described in a quotation above – there was no celebrating mood, no farewell party, no well-wishers. Having made a solitary decision, he left alone "without fanfare" (153) destined to meet a tragic fate ominously revealed by a crude, but highly appropriate, parallel: "Perhaps someone going to market would have given him a lift and he would have shared the straw for the space of several miles with a calf bound for slaughter" (153-4). Indeed, Eamon's rendezvous with death was just as unavoidable.

Klara, in turn, resolutely tried to shut herself away from the realities of war. Her anger at Eamon's decision to "put himself and their love at risk" (137), wouldn't even most probably allow her to consider the idea of joining the nearly three thousand women who served as nurses and ambulance drivers, like Augusta in *The Underpainter* did. It's not that Klara was incapable of venturing into a traditionally male territory. Quite the opposite, it becomes very clear from the outset of the novel that she is "interested in participating in the male world of employment and independence,"[8] as Urquhart herself puts it. And those who knew Klara (the nuns, for instance) were well aware "of her fondness for men's work – carving, farming, tailoring – her fondness, and her skill" (10). In fact, the title of the first section of the novel, "The Needle and the Chisel," refers to Klara's absolute mastery of "two difficult skills learned from two masters" (30): tailoring and woodcarving, the first learned from her mother and the latter from her grandfather, a Bavarian woodcarver whose art became a great asset in Canada, the country where he chose to carve out a new life. To this double inheritance was then added the farming skills of her father, thus turning Klara into the bearer of all her family's talent and crafts(wo)manship. And yet, as she was growing up, she was made to feel second-best, especially by her mother, but also by her grandfather, as her brother Tilman, who disappeared when he was twelve, always seemed to be the family's favourite, a status which did not change with his absence. Klara's mother comes across not only as an austere unnurturing mother with whom Klara never really managed to connect, but also as an obsessively domineering, castrating figure who ended up losing the love of both of her children. Tilman would never be able to forget the chain with which she had intended to deprive him of his freedom and Klara, though not so literally harnessed as her brother, could only feel oppressed by a mother who always seemed ready to make some prejudiced remark, whether it be about flashy colours (76), French people (81), or what she called "the frivolity of the female sex" (81). By teaching Klara the art of tailoring, Helga Becker provided her daughter with the means which would allow her to see herself as an independent young woman before she was twenty, with "a much cherished bank account of her own" (47). But she did it without tenderness and for purely pragmatic reasons as she thought her daughter needed "some business to get on with" (33).

Klara's relationship with her other master, her grandfather, was a lot more fulfilling for she was emotionally much closer to him than to her mother. However, despite the fact that Joseph Becker is presented as a loving grandfather who used to tell Klara stories of his youth in the early days of Shoneval and of his boyhood in Europe, describing the mountains, waterfalls and monuments he had left behind, when it came to his skill, woodcarving, Klara was not the grandchild he had planned to became his follower. Tilman was. The Becker family's patriarch seemed to somehow intend to shape his grandchildren's destiny by choosing their names. So, by naming Tilman after Tilman Riemenschneider, "the great sixteenth-century carver" (44), Joseph was apparently hoping to determine his grandson's career choice and to inspire the boy with the love and fascination for the art that he himself felt. (There's actually no explicit indication in the novel that the grandfather named the boy after the celebrated artist, but it would seem too extraordinary a coincidence if the choice of name had not been made for this reason.) Many years later, when Tilman had been gone for a long time, Joseph would still recall the extreme care he had taken to ensure that his grandson would grow up in a stimulating environment:

> Her [Klara's] grandfather, however, loved to tell how the year Tilman was born a book of [Albrecht] Dürer's writings became available through a university in England, and how he had travelled all the way to Toronto to purchase it. It had contained, among other things, instructions from the great master on how a boy might be raised toward becoming the maker of great, far reaching, and infinitive art." This was seen as a highly auspicious sign by their grandfather and, after Tilman's birth, he lectured his daughter-in-law mercilessly on the subject. It was suggested that "the child be kept eager to learn and not vexed" and "that he dwell in a pleasant house so that

> he be distracted by no manner of hindrance." *Dürer had never been mentioned in relation to Klara's upbringing and this had not gone unnoticed by her*. (91-2, italics added)

But the high expectations Joseph had for Tilman were not fulfilled because the boy never showed the avid interest in learning Klara did, though he eventually proved to be quite gifted in bas-relief works. Klara, in turn, apparently wanting to clearly assert herself as well as her talent and mastery of woodcarving, resolved "to always concentrate on figures-in-the-round" (96). Not being the intended receiver of the teachings and technical explanations that Tilman was passionately provided with, Klara ended up becoming the persevering apprentice her grandfather never formally took on. While Tilman was still around, her presence in the workshop was allowed but not exactly acknowledged and she had, therefore, to strive to get her grandfather's attention. The interest and talent shown by Klara were not so much ignored but rather dismissed by Joseph, for whom woodcarving – professional woodcarving, at least – could only be an indisputably male gendered skill. He was the inheritor of a centuries-old tradition which had always been carried on by men alone and whose great masters – the ones Joseph looked up to – were consequently male as well. Klara herself internalised the notion that, for her, carving was not meant to be anything more than a leisure activity. It was something she never considered as a possible career or as a means of earning her living:

> The building [where Klara used to carve her saints]'s small size and its separateness from the house gave the whole exercise the atmosphere of play; carving was the reward that she permitted herself when her other chores were completed. Pure pleasure came to her then as the fashioning of her wooden people was connected to neither the necessities of survival nor the need to bring cash into the household . (38)

On this point, Klara's story is somewhat reminiscent of that of Judith Shakespeare's, the famous parable created by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* to illustrate the lack of opportunities and material conditions that women traditionally had to face, which prevented them from developing and expressing their literary talent. It was not in the art of literature that Klara showed to be gifted, but it seems nonetheless clear that, just as in Judith's case, her brother was provided with the education and encouragement which she did not receive because the weight of a deep-rooted patriarchal tradition determined it to be so. Klara's story is, however, less tragic than Judith's as she is eventually able to put her skill and talent to full use by the end of the novel, when the art of carving enables her to come to terms with her past and begin a new cycle in her life. But before that crucial moment in Klara's life – and in the narrative sequence itself – there was a long time when she didn’t even carve. It was a twenty-year period of complete emotional paralysis, when the possibility of getting over past sorrows and starting again did not seem to be an option available to Klara, who, after suffering the terrible blow of Eamon’s death, felt alienated from the world around and even from her pre-August 1914 self. Although, as time went by, she routinely kept social contact with other people in the village, she nevertheless felt disconnected from them and excluded from life itself:

> Sometimes while she was sewing she thought for hours at a time about life beyond her walls. It was then she felt most like a ghost haunting the businesses and shops of the only community she knew, of no relevance to the actors in any of the small dramas that were unfolding. She who had recorded the body measurements of everyone in town, who knew their vanities, intuited their secret romances, could determine their mood during a fitting by gesture or posture, left absolutely no trace of herself in the minds of those she encountered.
>
> (...)
>
> Her own connections continually slipped downstream, against the current, toward the swiftly disappearing past. What beyond the most cursory, practical knowledge of fashion, had the present to do with her? (168-9)

Seeing herself as a ghost condemned to live in the past, Klara was equally perceived by others to be “geist-ridden” (29) and eccentric (29, 222). In Urquhart’s novels it is indeed common for female protagonists to be the object of a process of *othering* installed by those who, failing to understand these women, seem to somehow feel safer by labelling them pejoratively. Klara is, thus, part of a larger group of female characters that also includes Fleda, Mary and Eileen, who are all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, considered to be outcast or inadequate by society. The quotation above also shows us very clearly that Klara felt trapped in a confined, claustrophobic environment which was the only one she had always known. The people she loved had either died or gone away, leaving her behind within “her walls,” having no-one to share her loneliness with. She did have her memories, of course, but she tried to keep herself as busy as possible in order not to think too much about the past. The present, in turn, couldn’t offer much consolation, either, not just for Klara but for people across Canada, as the country – and indeed the whole world – was plunged into an economic depression which had left “the older parts of the village [Shoneval] in a state of decay usually associated with the decline of a complete civilization and the newer sections consisting of sloppy, half-finished attempts at twentieth-century industry [...]” (5-6). It is then clear from the beginning of the novel that a cycle is coming to an end and that a new one can only be about to begin – not just for Shoneval and Canada, but for Klara as well.

After two sections which present the readers with a sequence of flashbacks, firstly to Klara's youth, and even further back to the early years of Shoneval, in the second half of the nineteenth century, and then to the time Tilman spent roaming across Ontario, in the third section, "The Monument," the novel catches up with the present time of the narrative, 1934, which had only been briefly glimpsed hitherto. The topic of Klara's disconnection from the Snoneval community as well as from her own sheltered life is resumed in this final section, and the idea that readers could have vaguely got in the early chapters of the novel that the events which had taken place in Klara's youth gave her "enough spiritual company to make her life quite full" (30) is proved wrong here. Klara is, instead, presented as dissatisfied with her empty, monotonous existence, simultaneously looking forward to and fearing some sort of change in her life.

> Each Sunday after mass she indulged herself by reading a newspaper, *The Goderich Star Sentinel* or, if she could get it, *The London Free Press*. The wealth of stories contained in these journals both stimulated and disoriented her, making her wish that something would happen in her own life, then making her fear that such a wish was capable of changing her current neutrality for discontent. (226)

When Klara was young, it seemed that if she could have the possibility to do so, she would have chosen to live in a cocoon world, protected from outside interference like the Great War, which took Eamon away from her. Back then it was either her father or grandfather who brought home news of the events which, despite taking place in that cruel outside world, could – and did – impact on her own life, such as the declaration of war in 1914 (132), and two years later, the news of Eamon's death (160-2). Later on, it would be Klara herself who looked for echoes of her contemporary world in the newspaper, but in any case she always had a mediated access to it. She could hear or read about events and realities taking place in landscapes and geographies well beyond "the limit of her own known territory" (240), but she was totally unable to take part in them, to become an active agent and participator in those experiences. That changes, though, with Tilman's return, an event which, thus, becomes a catalyst for change in his sister's life. Klara, whose experience of the war was one of grief and loss as well as detachment from the world which had been involved in that war, is confronted with Tilman's combatant perspective of a conflict that left him not only physically but also emotionally maimed. He is, once again, a man bringing home the news of a male world from which Klara had always felt excluded despite her ability to exercise traditionally male skills. Tilman gives Klara his personal account of the war and of the equally traumatic experiences he went through in the years that followed, back in Canada, in flashbacks which stir up not only harrowing memories but also intense feelings of resentment and bitterness towards the whole Canadian society. The novel, thus, provides social commentary on the cruel treatment given to handicapped soldiers in postwar Canada:

> Like Tilman, most of the other men in the factory [which produced wooden prostheses, having become known as Limb-Bo] had nowhere else to go. Wives, girlfriends, in some cases even mother and fathers had withdrawn in horror at their physical condition. If the men had worked in offices before the war, old employers had claimed that they were not able to find a position for them. Physical labour was out of the question. (234)
>
> (...)
>
> As hastily as the department had opened the factory, they now firmly closed it down [two years or so after its opening]. Satisfied that they had done all that they could to rehabilitate Tilman and his colleagues, the same government that had called these young men so earnestly to arms now cast them unceremoniously out into the streets. (235)

Although Klara is repeatedly presented throughout the novel as fascinated by narrative – she was one of the very few people to whom “the tale [of the foundation of Shoneval] continued to be dear” (6), “an ancient religion replete with narrative” (30) and “the knowledge of the village’s mythology” (30) are counted as two of her possessions, and one of the reasons why she decides to make the journey to France is “to see if there was another point of view, another narrative waiting for her in a landscape she hadn’t yet experienced” (246) – she is deeply disturbed and haunted by accounts of the horrors of war, which she prefers not to hear about (243). The unsettling nature of these narratives is, of course, distinctly at odds with the reassuringly sense of belonging offered by the tales Klara had grown up with.

Of all the echoes of the war that reach Klara through Tilman, there’s one that particularly interests her: that of the Canadian memorial being built at Vimy, in France. Having been mourning Eamon’s death for nearly two decades (and having herself demanded a memorial in the Shoneval council meetings (29) years before), she suddenly realises that taking part in a collective endeavour to remember and honour those who, like Silent Irish, had lost their lives on the battlefield is the only possible way of putting her memories of Eamon to rest and achieve the lasting reconciliation she needs to get on with her life. Tilman was, after all, not the only one who knew what it was like to be in limbo. Klara’s motivations were, in fact, part of a much larger phenomenon taking place at the time. Indeed, the aftermath of the war witnessed the development of a culture of commemoration, as whole communities tried to find collective solace after 1918. Memorials were among the most common expressions of the state of mourning so typical of that period, but they were by no means unknown to previous historical epochs as Jay Winter writes:

> From the Acropolis to the Arc de Triomphe, war memorials have been central to the history of European architecture and public sculpture. They have been important symbols of national pride. But however powerful the aesthetic or political message they carried or attracted, these monuments had another meaning for the generation that passed through the trauma of war. That meaning was as much existential as artistic or political, as much concerned with the facts of individual loss and bereavement as with art forms or with collective representations, national aspirations, and destinies.
>
> War memorials were places where people grieved, both individually and collectively. The ways they did so have never been fully documented. For anyone living in Europe, these "documents" are part of the landscape. To find them one must simply look around. The still visible signs of this moment of collective bereavement are the objects, both useful and decorative, both humane and sacred, placed in market squares, crossroads, churchyards, and on or near public buildings after 1914. Some were built during the war, mostly in the decade following the Armistice. They have a life history, and like other monuments have both shed meanings and taken on new significance in subsequent years. [9]

Some of the war memorials which, as Jay Winter tells us, are so common in European landcapes were built by non-European countries to honour their fallen. Such is the case of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial, built by the people of Canada in the site of the battle of Vimmy Ridge, near Arras, in northern France. It remains Canada's most impressive overseas tribute to those of its citizens who served their country in the four-year conflict, particularly to those who gave their lives. Over 600,000 Canadians (mostly troops, but also women as nurses and ambulance drivers) crossed the Atlantic to do war service, 66,000 of whom had died by November 1918, when the war ended. The names of the nearly 20,000 posted as "missing or presumed dead" (having consequently no known graves) are inscribed on memorials in Canada and Europe, one of which is the Vimy Memorial. With its gigantic twin pylons and twenty sculptured figures, it is an imposing monument which took eleven years to build, becoming the most important project – and consuming obsession – in the life of its creator, Canadian architect and sculptor Walter Seymour Allward (1875-1955), whom Urquhart includes in the cast of characters of *The Stone Carvers* and to whom she seems to have written the novel as a tribute. Regretting that "the knowledge of Allward's genius was quickly forgotten" (381) by Canadians, the novelist is, thus, apparently trying to save him from the oblivion he has faded into.

It's interesting to notice that just as the Vimy memorial marks the site of a Canadian victory over German forces which is seen by military historians as a crucial turning point for the Allied Powers as well as an awakening of Canadian nationhood,[10] working on the memorial also marks a turning point in Klara's life. Hearing about its construction from

Tilman, it becomes her prime goal to work there as a carver, although she had never carved marble before. Her self-confidence regarding her ability to learn how to do it and her intention to go back to, and broaden, a skill she had abandoned twenty years before signal a completely new outlook on life. Once Klara sets her mind on going to France, a curious reversal of roles takes place: Tilman, whom she had always taken to epitomise what she considered to be men's congenital restlessness and refusal to surrender to the "tyranny of the feminine" – he was, after all, the one in the Becker family who "suffered from wanderlust" (94) – raises all sorts of objections to the journey, while Klara who had never left Shoneval, reveals an urgent need for escape and change as she has grown tired of feeling "trapped in her constant place" (251) and becomes, therefore, completely obsessed with the idea of going to France, regardless of obstacles and difficulties. The journey poses tough challenges to both Klara and Tilman because as socially – and emotionally – vulnerable people they'll have to be able to deal with their vulnerabilities and overcome the hurdles they'll be faced with. For Tilman the challenge is both physical and psychological: crossing the Atlantic and returning to the site of the battle which handicapped him for life doesn't merely present the difficulties caused by the physical discomfort he will experience, it will also bring back the traumatic memories of war. Klara, in turn, faces a challenge of a different nature but by no means less serious. As a woman planning to join a peaceful (and very cosmopolitan) army of workmen engaged in the formidable task of building the memorial, she is aware of the rules that forbid her from taking part in it on account of her gender. Tilman's warning could hardly be any clearer: "You're a woman, Klara, and everyone else is men. Not one of them would hire a woman" (250). As they set out on their journey, the two siblings may strike us as quite different individuals, with respect to their character and personality, but they strangely seem to complement each other. Tilman lacks his sister's motivation to undertake the task ahead, but he is certainly acquainted with the ways of the world and is, by nature, a survivor, which turns him into a qualified partner. Klara has absolutely no experience of the world she's about to venture into but her determination to go ahead with her plan provides her with unlimited resourcefulness and creativity, as clearly attested by her decision to cross-dress to pass for a man. Having spent two decades struggling to blot out memories of her prematurely, and tragically, broken romance with Eamon, she had, in the process, tried to repress her body, sensuousness, and sexuality. As the third section of the novel opens, she is accordingly presented as "sexless" (221), like the stereotypical spinster (if such stereotype exists), whose portrait is drawn extensively by the narrator. For Klara, then, the mirror becomes not a symbol of female vanity or narcissism, but is instead representative of her conscious efforts to have an ascetic appearance: "Each morning she rose, washed, put on one of those dark cotton dresses and an apron, and laced up her shoes. The mirror was used by her to make certain that no strand of hair escaped the severe knot she tied each day at the back of her head" (222-3). Any struggle between body and mind would be won by the latter – rational, self-disciplined Klara wouldn't have it otherwise: "At night her body sometimes attempted to awaken distant memories, but her mind would have none of it. This was going to be her life, this routine of daily tasks and chores and prayers. Whether she was happy did not seem to be important" (223). These circumstances, therefore, seem to make Klara's (temporary) flight into androgyny a development which, if not exactly inevitable or even foreseeable, is, at least, not altogether inconceivable. Besides, having learned from her mother that clothes do make the man – and the woman as well (46) – Klara as a tailor is able to make the items of clothing she needs to effect her transformation. The androgynous figure that results is, thus, exclusively her own creation and, although a comparison with Charlie Chaplin is established by the narrator, she couldn't possibly have him for a reference for she had never been to the cinema (256). In *The Stone Carvers* Jane Urquhart therefore gets back to the clothing metaphor which is so central in her first novel, *The Whirlpool*, but this time she goes a step further, incorporating the topic of transvestism into the narrative. By doing so, she joins a long list of writers and artists who, over the centuries, have shown their interest in cross-dressing practices. Their works are very often the object of close critical analysis, having been turned into prime case studies in the debate over the naturalness or constructedness of the gender category, as Marjorie Garber observes: "It's curious how many literary and cultural critics have recently studied the phenomenon of cross-dressing in literature from the Renaissance to high modernism. The appeal of cross-dressing is clearly related to its status as a sign of the constructedness of gender categories."[11] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are two of the scholars who have focused on this topic. In "Cross-Dressing and Re-Dressing: Transvestism as Metaphor," a chapter of the second volume of their immensely influential *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar make it quite clear that the transvestite plot has enjoyed a wide appeal for authors and artists for several centuries. Tracing its Anglo-Saxon manifestations back to Renaissance authors like Shakespeare and Philip Sidney, they go on to chronicle and analyse some of the most relevant contributions to this area made by authors from different periods, with a special emphasis on modernism, when interest in transvestism and transsexualism was, to a great extent, stimulated by Freud's theories and writings on sexuality. As a very apt metaphor to interrogate and disrupt gender categories, the transvestite plot was, then, profoundly in tune with a period of swift social changes which liberated women from centuries-old restrictions and forced a redefinition of traditional gender roles. If, on the one hand, women writers rejoiced over the blurring of gender boundaries, some male authors (among them such prominent poets and novelists as D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce), on the other hand, expressed their anxiety about the accelerated transformations taking place at the time, as Gilbert and Gubar tell us:

> Confronting drastically changing sex roles as well as dramatically changing definitions of sexuality, and fearing the physical and metaphysical anomaly of no-manhood, modernist men of letters sought to excavate an ontological link between biological sexuality and the traditional sexual ideologies whose disintegration they found so disturbing.[12]

Women writers, for their part, adopted a radically different stance, determined to challenge the notion of biological fate encapsulated in Freud's famous aphorism "anatomy is destiny." For many of them, transvestism was more than a literary metaphor as they themselves dressed as men:

> And from Renée Vivien to Radclyffe Hall and Djuna Barnes, from Vita Sackeville-West to Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein, a number of other women transgressively appropriated male costumes or oscillated between parodically female and sardonically male outfits, as if to declare that, as Woolf said, we are what we wear, and therefore, since we can wear anything, we can be anyone.[13]

Virginia Woolf's words, freely reproduced in the quotation above, are obviously taken from her historical fantasy *Orlando* (1928), whose eponymous character is surely one of the most famous transsexuals/tranvestites in world literature. The novel can be read as an imaginatively articulated statement on gender fluidity for even Orlando's sex change is "accomplished painlessly"[14] (Marjorie Garber has called it a "pronoun transplant"[15]), thus suggesting that barriers between the sexes are, indeed, very fluid. Not all modernist dramatisations of this theme were as fanciful and light-hearted in tone, though. For instance, Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, published in the same year as *Orlando,* is a realistic and bleak account of the painful existence of its female protagonist, who feels as a man trapped in a woman's body. This overtly lesbian novel was confiscated by government censors and prosecuted for obscenity. Despite her reservations about the literary accomplishment shown by Hall in her controversial novel, Woolf, protesting the banning of the book, offered to testify on its behalf and defended it in court.

As the twentieth century moved on, the figures of the cross-dresser and the transsexual by no means lost their place in literary works as well as in other artistic and cultural forms. In Anglo-Saxon literature, the 1970s – the decade of second-wave feminism and the heyday of gender theory – were particularly rich in depictions of sex change and transvestism, once again in direct connection with the contemporary debate about gender issues, a topic which then started to be exhaustively analysed and theorised about in the academic circle, thus gaining added visibility and cultural impact. Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Lois Gould's *A Sea-Change* (1975) and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) are three prominent examples of novels written at the time which have received careful critical attention, taking their place besides other works that, in the spirit of the sexual revolution then under way, defied patriarchal culture and problematised gender identity and gender distinctions by daringly exploring themes such as sexual undecidability, rape, homo- and bisexuality and sex change, creating alternative worlds where enduring myths about creation, reproduction and sexuality are systematically debunked.

Because literary works are obviously informed with the concerns, debates and priorities that define the society in which they are produced, the social and cultural upheaval of the 1970s found a powerful expression in contemporary literature, which, thus, often took an urgent, militant tone. It would, of course, be unreasonable to argue that the use of transvestism in *The Stone Carvers* is similar to the one it is given in the novels referred to above since Urquhart does not so much *explore* but rather *touches on* the topic of transvestism. Furthermore, the metaphoric and symbolic meanings usually associated with transvestism or cross-dressing are not to be found in *The Stone Carvers*, as no connection with sexual ambivalence or lesbianism is established in the novel. It is, indeed, true that Klara felt trapped by the constraints of femininity, envying man's constant readiness to take the road and leave, while she stayed behind stuck within the four walls of her family home, confined to her humdrum existence. But by dressing as a man Klara is not trying to escape her female anatomy; she's trying to escape the gender restrictions imposed on women by patriarchal culture and seeking to venture into a man's world where, as a woman, she would not be allowed to enter. She nonetheless feels that wearing men's clothes will inevitably imply *putting on* a new self, something which is eagerly anticipated by her: "[...] she looked forward to the change of costume, the change of self" (262). Once the change of costume is completed and Klara disposes of her woman's clothes, she clearly realises that she has reached a pivotal moment in her life and that the garments she throws into the river symbolically represent a part of herself (of her *self*, actually) she's saying good-bye to:

> When they boarded the ship in Montreal in mid-November, Klara was covered by a coat, a vest, trousers, and a cap, having decided to change gender once she left Ontario behind. She had walked to the end of a pier on the St. Lawrence River with a bundle under arm and, after looking guiltily around, had dropped her burden into the water. Moved by the sight of her familiar clothing opening like the petals of dark flowers in the river, she had wept a little at what suddenly seemed to her to be the death of her young womanhood, a discarded body, floating away toward the sea, the arms of the black silk blouse extended as if still anticipating a lover's embrace. (292)

Klara soon discovers that when attired in man's clothes she is able to enjoy a kind of freedom she had never had before: "Not one of these hobos gave Klara a second glance as she beckoned her brother, and she began, right then, to understand the freedom her costume gave her, a feeling of calm, similar to the one she imagined men must experience walking unnoticed through the world" (293-4). Although Klara does not experience Woolf's flamboyant protagonist's "vacillation" between the sexes, her adventure is, at times closely reminiscent of Orlando's. After having become a woman, Lady Orlando takes to cross-dressing because, amongst other reasons, the (re)appropriation of masculine insignia allows her entry into places where only men were admitted: "[...] she would don a snuff-coloured gown like a lawyer's and visit the courts to hear how her cases were doing [...]."[16] Besides, both of them undergo a dramatic change in their lives at an age which, for long, was deemed by society and literature to be far from auspicious to women's success: Orlando becomes a woman at the age of thirty and Klara is verging on forty when she embarks on her adventure. The fate of the female protagonists featured in such classic realist works as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) or Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) is undoubtedly less kind: the heroines of both novels reach a dead end in their lives as they approach thirty, suicide becoming the only way out. It's interesting to notice that Klara in her late thirties is a mature woman who, therefore, does not feel girlish anymore. She actually seems to be quite self-conscious about her age and sees herself (and is seen by others) as no longer young (30, 31, 370), but once she starts dressing as a man, she looks boyish to other people on account of "her small body" (308), which, thus, makes it difficult for her to keep up her disguise in a confident mood. Moreover, Klara feels that men are opaque to her for she believes she has never been able to fully understand the ones who have played an important part in her life – Eamon, her grandfather, her father and, more recently, her brother (298-9) – which adds to her insecurities about how to "manipulate the mask of her new identity" (298). So cross-dressing is not entirely empowering for Klara because, after an initial phase of delight at the positive impact of wearing men's clothes, which makes her feel freer (293-4), braver (297) and even bossy (297), it seems to start posing problems that Klara hadn't foreseen at first (or had, at least, minimised), and which turn her disguise into the source of some uneasiness. She, thus, fears that her "mask" may slip, revealing her feminine identity and exposing Karl, "the small man," as a fraud. This role she casts herself in so that she is able to fulfil her wish to work in the memorial can, therefore, be perceived as an alter ego whom Klara doesn't appear to feel very comfortable with. Because she cross-dresses to pass for a man and not to act out any fantasy stemming from an inner desire to achieve sexual pleasure, or even become a man, she does not look upon her transvestism as a permanent practice but rather as a temporary solution to achieve her purposes. It should be noticed that when Klara snicks out of the dormitory intending to work on the torchbearer's half-finished face, giving it Eamon's facial features, she's described as "carrying her true self to the task" (331) and it's equally revealing that when Walter Allward, after an initial fit of rage, agrees not to destroy Klara's work and actually allows her to finish it and to stay and work as a woman in the memorial, she thanks him clearly conveying the relief she feels about not having to keep up her disguise anymore:

> "Thank you."
> "For letting you stay? It's not much."
> "For letting me stay, yes, but also for giving me my voice back." (340)

As Karl, she was "[m]ale and mute" (261), having to whisper her words in order not to reveal her true gender, which was obviously a far from empowering situation. Allward gives Klara her voice back in two ways: on the one hand, he acknowledges her as a woman and lets her go on working as a female worker, and on the other hand – and most importantly to Klara – he lets her have her say on the memorial by allowing the torchbearer to have Eamon's face. As he tells her further on in the novel, "you've already made your statement, as the saying goes" (346). Having made the sea voyage intending to work at Vimy, if possible as a carver, Klara manages to achieve her goal. To do it she had to cross gender lines and play the role of transgressor because otherwise she wouldn't have been able to fulfil her plan. As a woman passing for a man hired to work in a completely male enterprise (conceived to honour the dead in a tragic public event regarded by its contemporaries as an entirely male affair as well), Klara is a kind of undercover agent whose actions are appropriately described with adverbs like “surreptitiously” (333) and “illicitly” (374) because before the climactic scene of ‘gender discovery’ she is totally unable to share her feminine experience of the war with any of the men who work with her and reveal her personal motivations for working at Vimy. Both her work on the torchbearer’s face and the carving of Eamon’s name on the memorial’s wall are tasks Klara takes upon herself without asking for Allward’s permission to do them (knowing she would be denied it). Coincidentally (or not so...) he arrives on the scene on the two occasions, but he does not order her work to be changed or destroyed, which is a kind of reluctant legitimacy Klara gets from the patriarchal authority that Allward symbolises. Klara’s bold behaviour clearly shows that women don’t have to – and shouldn’t – comply with patriarchal rules that deprive them of their rights and deny them equal status in society. If they don’t challenge discriminatory principles and practices they end up becoming passive supporters of absurd notions which intend to restrict their opportunities and convince them that their lives have to be narrower than men’s on account of their gender, thus perpetuating cultural determinism. Revealing herself to be as daring and driven as any man can aspire to be, Klara becomes a late New Woman, determined and strong-willed enough to defy notions about femininity and womanhood that she herself had internalised. Her adventure fully supports the views put forward by leading feminists from Virginia Woolf to Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler: it is not biology that constrains women, it’s patriarchal culture. Inner strength can be made into a far more valuable asset than physical one. Although “small,” as perceived by her fellow workers, Klara’s body proves to be strong enough to do man’s work, work that is “careful, skilled” (337), as Allward himself “ha[s] to admit” (337). Klara, thus, becomes (for a short while, at least) one of the stone carvers working at Vimy, an anonymous mass of workers whom Jane Urquhart pays homage to in this novel, even referring to them in its title.[17] Allward, Urquhart tells us, only hired Italians for the job as he thought they were the most talented carvers he could get. To work with him and follow his strict rules, they also had to be absolutely devoted and artistically selfless for the architect wouldn’t allow any “theatrical feats of originality” (336). For that reason, he sees Klara as “too dangerous” (346). It’s very obvious that Urquhart greatly admires the work of Walter Allward but *the* Walter Allward in *The Stone Carvers* comes across as a creator that was artistically possessive, not allowing anyone around him to show their creativity or provide additional input into the project. It seems that he jealously regarded the memorial as his memorial, doing without other people's contributions. But, on the other hand, as an artist he had the sensibility that bureaucrats and governments lacked, and it was by sheer persistence that his "efforts to document the past" (379) were rewarded. He made art triumph over accounting.[18] Together with King Ludwig and semi-fictional Father Gstir, Walter Allward is part of a trinity of visionaries whose ambition, daring and single-minded determination to fulfil their dreams are praised in *The Stone Carvers*. As creators or patrons, they left behind them works of artistic or cultural value which, so long after their deaths, are still perpetuating their memory in today's world.

But for kings, clergymen and artists whose projects win competitions it is relatively easy to leave their mark on history: "the impossible happens as a result of whims that turn into obsessions" (330) because they have the power and the authority to make the impossible happen. The disenfranchised, the down and outers, the marginalised groups such as women and workers have, on the contrary, virtually no historical visibility. It's highly symbolic that when Klara leaves the dormitory heading for the studio built around the torchbearer, she walks barefoot so that no one will hear her. To make "[h]er own mark" (334) on the memorial she has to be discrete and attract no attention, almost having to tiptoe, otherwise her plans will be thwarted. And Klara does it not to satisfy any personal ambition or vanity, but to honour the memory of her first love and make a final gesture of forgiveness for his decision to choose war instead of her. When Eamon was reported missing two years after the outbreak of the war, she had sought solace in the two-dimensional shape of his measurements on the floor of the sunroom. At the time she had thought "[h]e would have only the traces of a waistcoat as a memorial" (261). Now at Vimy, twenty years later, Klara intends to give Eamon's face to the stone figure of the torchbearer and immortalise his innocence and optimism, fittingly conveyed by the figure's uplifting face, looking skyward as if in search of a kite or an aeroplane, as Eamon had surely often done in his short life. As a foot soldier, he, as so many others like him, had been kept out of the historical record, except as a number to be included in the 'casualties of war' table of history books. By modelling the torchbearer's face on Eamon's, Klara is not just leaving "[h]er own mark" on the memorial, she is highlighting Silent Irish's supreme sacrifice and making him the representative of a whole "lost generation." Carving Eamon's face, thus becomes a healing, cathartic experience for Klara as it allows her to rediscover "the pure joy of making art" (334) and requires her to draw on memories that for many years she had tried to push away from her. Bringing them back is precisely what enables her to put the past behind her, fall in love again and start a new cycle in her life. It's interesting to notice that her other gesture of reconciliation with her memories of Eamon – the carving of his name on the memorial's wall – is made with Giorgio's help, as if suggesting that Klara, by sharing with him the story of her tragic first love, is finally ready to turn a leaf in her life and make room for him. It also seems appropriate that a romance which had had an important prelude in written words – the words in the notebook with songs that Eamon had left in Klara's workshop and which had disturbed her so deeply – should be put to rest with written words as well. A full circle is complete, then, and Klara gets back to Canada feeling whole, as her experience at Vimy enables her "to reassemble her persona, to remember who it was she was meant to be" (345). She no longer needs to suppress the self she had tried to discard in order to deal with her suffering and sense of loss. Getting back to work on the abbess and finishing it twenty years after she had started it, is highly symbolic of Klara's newly-found emotional stability since the parallel between the abbess's facial expression and Klara's state of mind had been clearly established right from the start.

It may surprise readers that a woman who had gone through such an adventure, would gladly go back to her small village, looking forward to lead the quite life of a married woman. This is so perhaps because by the end of the novel Klara has reached the peace of mind and tranquillity she had known in her youth before she experienced grief and loss. Anyway, women should have the right to make their choices. If they opt for wifehood and motherhood they should be entitled to do so since that option – as long as it is an option, not an imposition – is as legitimate as any other. And this is precisely the choice Klara makes. It is, nonetheless, by any standards a very rosy, happy-ending story, which is far from usual in Urquhart's novels. The only less conventional development in the narrative is Tilman's fulfilling homosexual relationship with a former French soldier.

For the two siblings, then, the journey to France is both physical and emotional for they come back home with old, deep scars healed and more than ready to start afresh. However, in a perverse example of history repeating itself, the horrific past which had so indelibly marked their lives, as well as those of millions of other people, would make a tragic return only a few years later, as in 1939 the world was drawn into an even more devastating war, which brutally shattered the belief that WW I had been “the war to end wars.” So, despite the positive resolutions of Klara’s and Tilman’s personal dramas, their traumatic experiences of loss, suffering and pain were far from eradicated from the world and *The Stone Carvers* tells us that, as the thirties approached their end, there were again worrying signs of a very dark cloud gathering over humanity: the military was by then, as Urquhart puts it, “too busy preparing for a violent future to allow in nostalgia for a violent past” (379). Just as shocking as the tragedy of war itself is the power of insane, megalomaniac elites to disrupt and sacrifice the lives of countless millions of people.

Notes

1 The Great War poets have, nonetheless, swung in and out of fashion throughout these nine decades, as Geoff Barton tells us: “After a brief popularity following the War, they were neglected until the Second World War, and then again until the 1960s. Now they are recognised as an important part of our heritage.”

Geoff Barton. ”Introduction.” *Voices of the Great War*. Ed. Geoff Barton. London: Longman, 2003 (1997): p. xvi.

2 In fact the militaristic stance on the war taken up by some women, namely a considerable number of those involved in the suffrage movement, could only foster such resentment, as easily inferred from Sheila Rowbotham’s words:

> The feminist organisations had divided over the war. Christabel [Pankhurst] became one of the most fervent opponents of Germany. *The Suffragette* changed its name in 1915 to *Britannia* and supported military conscription for men, industrial conscription for women. The WSPU suffragettes were among the first women to give men in civilian clothes white feathers of cowardice. They campaigned to get women into the munition factories and marched against the men who were trying to protect skilled workers. The government obliged by paying the suffragettes’ expenses for the march. They were greeted by their old enemies, Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. At a meeting in Albert Hall in October 1916, Mrs Pankhurst spoke in favour of servicemen having a vote and denounced “conscientious objectors, passive resisters and shirkers” [Marion Ramelson. *Petticoat Rebellion*. 1972: p. 168].

Sheila Rowbotham. *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women’s Oppression and the Fight Against it*. London: Pluto Press, 1977 (1973): pp. 116-7.

3 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *No Man’s Land: Sexchanges*. Vol. 2. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989: p. 260.

4 McFadden, Deanna. “Interview with Jane Urquhart.” History.Television.ca.

http://www.historytelevision.ca/archives/remembrance/interview/JaneUrquhart/

5. Jane Urquhart. *The Stone Carvers*. London: Bloomsbury, 2001: p. 30. All further page references are given in the text.

6 Jane Urquhart has explained that she found inspiration for Shoneval in a real life village in Southwestern Ontario. It’s not purely fictional, then:

> In real life that would be Formosa. It’s in southwestern Ontario. Formosa is an oddly named village. A Portuguese priest apparently took one look and said: Formosa. Which means beautiful or lovely or comely or something in Portuguese. And he was talking about the valley. His successor really was the man that I read about who was responsible for building the church on top of the hill with money donated by Mad Ludwig of Bavaria, which I think is so stunning.

Linda Richards. “Interview with Jane Urquhart.” *January Magazine*. June 2001.

http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/urqhuart.html

7 Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilock. *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000 (1998): pp. 168-9.

8 “Interview with Jane Urquhart” (see note 4).

9 Jay Winter. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995: p. 79.

10 Desmond Morton writes that “ Vimy was one of those great deeds, done together, which create nations.”

Desmond Morton. *A Short History of Canada*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001 (Fifth edition): p. 181.

11 Marjorie Garber. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992: p. 9.

12 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *No Man’s Land: Sexchanges*. p. 98.

13 *Ibid*. p. 327.

14 Virginia Woolf. *Orlando*. 1928. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993: p. 98.

15. Marjorie Garber. *Vested Interests*. p. 134.

16 Virginia Woolf. *Orlando*. p. 135.

17 *The Stone Carvers* is, on this point, reminiscent of José Saramago’s *O Memorial do Convento*, a book which also foregrounds the workers involved in the construction of an imposing monument.

18 Art has a strong presence in Urquhart’s novels as clearly attested by *The Stone Carvers*, which, as the author herself has said, is “about the redemptive nature of making art” (Linda Richards. “Interview with Jane Urquhart”). In fact, the themes of making, studying, or enjoying art – whether it is literature, painting or sculpture and architecture – run through most of her work.

Conclusion

Writing a fictional narrative that brings the past back to life is an enterprise which may (and in so many cases *does*) go well beyond a purely entertaining purpose. As Herb Wyile observes, “the historical novel is, like history, one of the ways in which we make meaning of the past,” and consequently “any attempt to see one [history] as ‘science’ and the other [literature] as ‘entertainment’ is reductive, to say the least – especially when it comes to a genre like historical fiction.”[1] In their attempt to produce convincing representations of the past, historical novelists make use of sources similar to those used by historians. In fact, even a cursory reading of the acknowledgements page of many historical novels (Jane Urquhart’s, namely) is enough to show us that their authors carried out a research work which is not fundamentally different from the one historians are expected to do. In other words, the research work involved in the writing of historical fiction is not inherently inferior to that conducted by historians and which historical writing is built upon. The practitioners of both genres research a variety of documents and source materials aspiring to render the past familiar or, at the very least, less foreign and remote to the contemporary audience they address, a task which certainly mobilises all their imagination and resourcefulness. Indeed, opening a window into bygone eras about which there is quite often limited, partial textual evidence must require an extraordinary ability to imagine and (re)construct a coherent whole.

Within the academic circle, many believe that this stress on the affinity between the historian’s work and that of the historical novelist – i.e. the emphasis on the narrativity of historical discourse – cannot in itself be a pure and simple denial of the historian’s greater dependence and reliance on fact and documentary evidence, even in an age when the ontological discussion around the very notion of historical truth is high on the theoretical agenda. Lionel Gossman, for instance, expresses his views on this topic quite straightforwardly in his work *Between History and Literature*:

> What disturbs many practicing historians, as well as some who, like myself, have argued for greater recognition of the literary and rhetorical aspects of historiography, is less the claim that historical explanation always assumes a narrative form than the argument for the incommensurability of historical narratives that often accompanies that claim.[2]

Further on in his study, he distances himself even more clearly from the so-called narrativists, reasserting his unequivocal trust in history as a modern professional discipline:

"I believe it is important to emphasise the rationality of the historical enterprise and the commensurability of historical narratives, their vulnerability to criticism and review."[3]

Indeed, it seems entirely reasonable to argue that the historians' work is permanently subject to the analysis and judgement not only of their peers but also of scholars and critics from different backgrounds who take interest in this area of study. Their assessments introduce a kind of regulatory system which turns any given historical work into an object of scrutiny, thereby placing its author under the professional obligation of complying with basic principles and constraints which historical novelists are not bound by. When, for instance, Ishmael Reed chose a mixed cast of historical figures and fictional characters for his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* – an excellent example of the postmodernist subversion of founding mythical narratives and refusal to comply with the historical record – he earned high praise and critical acclaim for his originality and creative daring, which are displayed quite clearly in such satirical (and anachronistic) narrative options like featuring Moses in totally bizarre situations such as giving a live concert in a stadium, being attacked by missiles or practising Voodoo. Historians, for their part, are obviously denied this level of artistic freedom and invention, as anyone will certainly understand. That said, it is also indisputable that the process of writing a narrative (whether fictional or non-fictional) always involves selection, interpretation and organisation as prerequisites for the making of meaning, therefore turning complete objectivity into an unattainable goal, as many scholars working in the area of historical theory (especially those whose studies are informed with the postmodernist criticism of essentialist notions of truth and knowledge) have emphatically pointed out over the last decades. Alun Munslow is one of such scholars. He phrases it quite well when he states in *Deconstructing History* that "historical knowledge is not objective but has upon it the fingerprints of its interpreters," adding towards the end of the book that there is today a

> wide acceptance that the past, as written history, is a textual product of its age, and, given the central organising role of the historian, is inevitably inflected by presentist ideological demands and the current dispensations of power. It is increasingly accepted that the historian, through his/her narrative description, is fully implicated in any written representation of pastness. Few see history as a matter of following the evidence like footprints in the sands of time towards truth.[4]

If historians are "fully implicated" in their representations of the past, novelists, in turn, also look back to former times from a chosen perspective, approaching the past as a subject matter in order to pursue specific aims. Novelists from different periods will naturally view pastness from diverse angles because, as individuals, they are the product of the society they live in and their writings will consequently be informed with the values, principles and sensibilities of their day. It is perfectly possible for modern readers to show interest and admiration for the novels written by Scott or his followers, but (running the risk of stating the obvious) it is absolutely certain that they will find very substantial differences between those narratives and the historical fiction written today. And it’s not just the style and the discourse that sound so distinctively different (and even dated); the system of values underpinning those classic works also strikes us as very unlike the one that prevails in our society. As mentioned above, the genre has undergone considerable change since it was established by Walter Scott in the early nineteenth century so as to suit the literary market’s demands and the wishes and intentions of its practitioners, having in the meantime absorbed a variety of influences resulting from social and cultural transformations. It has therefore proved to be a rather resilient, versatile literary form whose evolution over time has enabled it to echo and articulate contemporary beliefs, ideals and concerns. It should, however, be stressed that when writing about the genre one inevitably ends up generalising, grouping very diverse novels under the umbrella term historical fiction. To begin with, the literary value of the many novels written under this form over the last two centuries has been quite uneven. Though it’s not difficult to find among them good examples of the so-called top rank literature, there’s also a (probably much larger) number of novels written without significant artistic or ideological concerns, simply catering for a market which, despite its ups and downs, has always existed and still does. Increasingly so, in fact. The remarkable revival of this type of fiction over the last three decades shows it quite clearly and the recent tremendous commercial (though not necessarily critical) success of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* is a phenomenon only made possible by a genuine desire among modern readership to be immersed in stories about bygone eras.

The way historical novelists have approached this literary form has also varied greatly over these nearly two hundred years, ranging from the early practitioners’ reverential attitude towards the historical record, which made them use their novels as somehow complementary to historiography, to the steadfast refusal to comply with it shown by many contemporary authors. The genre can, indeed, serve many purposes and writers who want to go beyond a merely *light* approach to the past can use it as a medium to articulate socially and culturally relevant messages. Writing about former times can, for instance, be a very eloquent way of commenting on the present, highlighting situations and problems that persist in contemporary society by identifying and examining its roots and historical antecedents.

Obviously not all novelists choose to focus on the past with the prime objective of meditating upon the present because the past in itself – and by itself – still generates an interest strong enough to fully justify centre stage in contemporary fiction. There is still so much to find out about it that literature's contribution to the process is simply too valuable to be overlooked. In recent decades, the combined influences of feminism, postmodernism and postcolonialism have led an increasing number of authors to problematise the way historical accounts have traditionally made meaning of the past. Adopting a revisionist attitude towards the official historical record, these writers' narratives give top priority to the suppressed versions of the past, thus foregrounding not the victors, but rather the victims, or losers, of history and while doing so they have completely reshaped historical fiction, a genre which many had thought to be entirely exhausted. Focusing on postmodernist representations of the past, Linda Hutcheon writes:

> We may indeed get few postmodern narrative representations of the heroic victors who have traditionally defined who and what made it into History. Often we get instead both the story and the story-telling of non-combatants or the losers: the Canadian Indians of Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* or Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*; the women of Troy in Christa Wolf's *Cassandra*; the blacks of South Africa or America in the work of J.M. Coetzee, André Brink, Toni Morrison, or Ishmael Reed.[5]

Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart places herself in that trend with her novels *The Whirlpool*, *Away* and *The Stone Carvers*, in which she gives voice to social groups traditionally marginalised by official versions of the past: immigrants, workers, colonised peoples and, most prominently, women. As explained in part two of this thesis, Urquhart's fiction cannot be adequately described as postmodernist for it does not have characteristic postmodern features such as satire or parody, and self-reflexivity is very sporadically used in her work. However, it is nonetheless informed with the postmodern determination to go beyond canonical representations of the past, enquiring about the forgotten lives of disenfranchised groups. Interestingly, Urquhart's distinctive lyrical style may lead less attentive readers (especially if they're only acquainted with her early work) to think of her as a writer of romantic stories with a strong fantasy element and therefore scarcely concerned with historically relevant social issues. Urquhart herself seems to be well aware of this reputation:

> I am supposed to be [one of the "queens" of escape literature], that's right. And part of my personality moves in that direction as well. I love writing because, although I may be dealing with things that are painful or joyful, it is a wonderful thing to do. It's much like entering the imaginary world of a child.[6]

Yet her fiction is anything but escapist as it looks back to the past engaging directly with history and inviting reflection on issues and situations that still interest us greatly nowadays especially because traditional historiography has paid them scant attention. Perhaps one of the reasons that encouraged Jane Urquhart to join the increasingly larger group of writers who use literature as a medium for revising and rewriting history was the fact that, as she was growing up, it was widely accepted in Canada that the country lacked historical depth, a notion that she strongly disputes:

> [W]e weren't taught our history at all, in school. We were taught the history of the British Empire and we were told that our history was boring – which I find laughable, because any time I go into an archive, I find there is no such thing as boring history, no matter which country you come from.[7]

She decided to deal with this subject in her first novel, *The Whirlpool*, which tells the story of the intersecting lives of four main characters, each of them with his/her own obsession. David McDougal, the military historian, is obsessed precisely with Canadian history and worries about the need to collect and preserve its vestiges and remains, a task which, as he sees it, has been systematically neglected by his countrypeople, whom he describes as completely lacking a historical consciousness: "This country buries its history so fast people with memories are considered insane" (72). He therefore feels rather lonely as he tenaciously swims against the tide of what he takes to be a case of collective denial of national identity – "Thinking Canadian is a very lonely business" (62) – but this only increases the urgency of his mission: "David desperately wanted a pure museum... one where he could place the relics of the *thin history* of the country where he lived" (151, emphasis added). The other characters in the novel do not share his interest in history. Patrick certainly doesn't and nor do the two female protagonists, Fleda and Maud. In fact, why should these two women be interested in history, a domain that by late nineteenth century, the time in which the novel is set, was thought to be an exclusively male domain, casting women in completely subordinate roles? Interestingly, it's Patrick, not any of the female characters, who takes time to ponder over the nature of history, concluding it is a fundamentally male construct:

> History. Like his uncle, Patrick was confused by the word. History, his story, whose story? Collections of facts that were really only documented rumours. When he thought hard about them, thought hard about facts, they evaporated under his scutiny [sic]. Crowds of men rushing towards

> each other with gleaming weapons. Fire. Large, hot, man-made fires. And the repetition. As if by speaking it over and over this collection of past facts might liquefy again, change from vapour into rain, become a large touchable body of water.

Indeed, androcentrism is one of the major limitations of official versions of the past. *The Whirlpool* echoes this point of view, showing that historical discourse has traditionally excluded women. In fact, the military historian's fixation on the supposedly unprecedented contribution of a female protagonist, Laura Secord, to an otherwise (officially) all-male event in Canadian history implies a resistance from his peers in the historical field which is not difficult to understand and explain in the light of the gender politics of the historical accounts produced in the period portrayed in the novel – it was clearly hostile to women. It's hardly surprising that it was so given all the social and political constraints that hindered female agency at the time. This is, then, the wider backdrop against which Jane Urquhart sets *The Whirlpool*, a multilayered narrative which can be analysed from a variety of angles, the feminist approach being definitely one of the most interesting on account of the novel's insightful look at the situation of women in Canada's Victorian society. The narrative's polyphonic structure gives readers direct access to the lives of two women who, each in her own way, defy asphyxiating social conventions and do not conform to the subordinate gender roles they had been assigned by the patriarchal society in which they live. As the story progresses, Maud's and Fleda's commitment to their quest for selfhood becomes more determined while the two male protagonists, for their part, come across as increasingly adrift, one of them eventually committing suicide. From a feminist point of view, this sharp contrast turns *The Whirlpool* into an optimistic tale which celebrates female agency and, by making Fleda and Maud the central characters in the story, subverts the minor position to which women have traditionally been relegated by history.

In her third novel, *Away*, Jane Urquhart, who is of Irish ancestry, returns to roots and examines the history of an Irish family that leaves Ireland during the great famine to emigrate to the Canadian wilderness. In this novel, Urquhart engages with history in a very direct manner once again and she does it in her unique style, combining the vivid portrayal of the harsh realities of colonial exploitation, famine, emigration and settlement with a strong presence of the marvellous and the supernatural, thus blending history and myth, reality and magic, the personal and the political. This work alone is enough to fully justify complimentary judgements like the one expressed by T.F. Rigelhof: "Urquhart has an uncanny ability to interweave historical events, legends, folk tales, visions, anecdotes, longings and journeys into a constantly surprising but wholly convincing, complicated and unified exploration of history, perception, memory and transformation."[8]

Away is, again, a woman-centred narrative which exposes how Canadian history has been narrowly defined not just in terms of gender but also ethnicity and culture. It shows us that nineteenth-century Upper Canada was not the close-knit English Protestant community that imperialist representations of the past may suggest it was. As the Irish Catholic O'Malley family settle in the backwoods of Upper Canada, they soon realise that their country's history of colonial oppression is not at all different from the one Native Canadians have suffered at the hands of the intruding coloniser. Mary's multicultural encounter with Exodus Crow highlights the plurality of the Canadian ethnic fabric and presents the two of them as representatives of dispossessed groups who share a largely common experience as victims of injustice and prejudice. Their plights are, thus, quite similar and so is the way that both the Irish and Native Canadians use their mythologies as a unifying force to help them coping with colonial exploitation and preserving their cultural identity. Myth and history are not incompatible in this story. The interplay between them is explored quite compellingly by Urquhart, who adds another key ingredient to the narrative: nationalism. The traditional historical novel of the nineteenth century was often informed with the nationalist ideologies and concerns which were emerging by then, thereby serving imperialist interests. However, over the last decades, a number of novelists have used the genre for entirely different purposes, as illustrated by *Away*, which does not endorse nationalist feelings, alerting us, instead, to its dangers. It nonetheless strongly emphasises the importance of honouring one's cultural roots, showing that, in the case of the Irish under colonial occupation by the English, myth, legends and history proved essential to preserve cultural heritage. Those (hi)stories, the novel clearly suggests, had the power to infuse the ones who believed, told and listened to them with the energy and courage to hold out in the face of colonial aggression. (Hi)story-telling thus becomes a source of unity and strength against the colonial other, who can seize the land, destroy the landscape and exploit the country's resources, but is unable to break the colonised people's spirit as long as they have the determination to keep the memory of their heritage and ancestry alive. If it breaks down, though, cultural identity will inevitably be under great pressure.

Honouring the memory of loved ones is also a driving force in *The Stone Carvers*, which presents us with a woman's experience of the Great War, a sweeping historical event which despite having taken place so many decades ago goes on holding the imagination of contemporary artists like Jane Urquhart. By adopting a female perspective on the war, *The Stone Carvers* goes a step further than the great majority of artistic representations of the event, which tend to present it from man's point of view, thus complying with the traditional notion that defines war as a male territory. With Klara Becker as the main focaliser, the novel explores the impact of a large scale historical event on the private lives of ordinary people, which again clearly signals a combination of feminist, postmodern and postcolonial influences in Urquhart's historical fiction. The novel praises visionaries' ability to make their dreams come true (whether the visionary is a king, an architect or a priest), but the main focus is put undoubtedly on those who have been left out of the historical record and who ironically made it possible for visionaries to leave their mark on history. They are, of course, the anonymous workers, either descended from or themselves immigrants, who struggle to find a place for themselves and their families in a country which lets them in but nonetheless presents them with disappointments and hardships.

If workers have traditionally been excluded from historical accounts, women (whether working-class or not) have been doubly marginalised and discriminated against throughout the times on account of entrenched patriarchal beliefs and rules that confined women to an imposed domesticity which forced them to act in passive obedience to their husbands and assigned them the traditional tasks of childbearing, child-rearing and taking care of the house. Like some of her other previous fictions, Urquhart's fifth novel also examines the situation of women who feel trapped in a man's world which does not give them the chance to show their skills, resourcefulness and creativity. But Urquhart is never repetitive or formulaic and chose a truly unique heroine to lead *The Stone Carvers*' cast. Klara is such a transgressive protagonist because, unlike women of her age in her community, she's single, childless and has performed male-gendered activities all her life. Determined and pragmatic, she's a frail-bodied but strong-willed woman who can be looked upon as a representative of so many anonymous women who throughout the centuries have been persistent and daring enough to transcend gender barriers and attain self-imposed ambitious goals, having nevertheless been ignored and marginalised by phallocentric representations of the past.

Jane Urquhart's historical fiction shows us that as one opens the window into the past nowadays, one inevitably comes across a variety of perspectives and voices which were marginalised and suppressed for too long and now claim recognition and visibility. Those versions of pastness, thus, need to be recovered and, of course, that task can be – and has been – carried out by scholars working in areas such as women's and social history or postcolonial studies, but literature has an important role to play in revising and rewriting the partial historical accounts that have been produced over the ages. In fact, according to Bakhtin, the novel is inherently a genre that privileges the existence of a dialogic relation among various voices and, therefore, we may add, particularly suited to refute monologic representations of the past. This is definitely the reason why the characters and conflicts portrayed in Jane Urquhart's historical fiction can have such a strong appeal to us, twenty-first century readers: in the pages of her novels we listen to voices that still sound very new and look at some perennial problems and situations from unusual angles. We also find it surprisingly easy to relate to them because Urquhart is a gifted storyteller and, in her unique style, writes about timeless feelings and experiences: love, hope, grief, destitution, displacement. As her characters set out on physical and emotional journeys, we, readers, join them and not only find out about their inner landscapes, but are also transported to the vividly described scenery of places likes Canada, Ireland or continental Europe. Those journeys seem to have an equally strong impact (of a different nature, though) on characters and readers alike. The first are obviously changed by the experiences they're faced with while journeying; the latter can only look forward to visit the places they've read about and, as they wait to fulfil that wish, they will certainly widen their horizons by following these inspiring protagonists in their compelling adventures. Theirs are the kind of histories that we won't read about in our old history books.

Notes

1 Herb Wyile. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002: pp. 24, 21.

2 Lionel Gossman. *Between History and Literature*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 2001 (1990): p. 293.

3 *Ibid*. p. 323.

4 Alan Munslow. *Deconstructing History*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003 (1997): pp. 8, 177.

5. Linda Hutcheon. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995 (1989): p. 51.

6. Laura Ferri. "A Conversation with Jane Urquhart." *Jane Urquhart: Essays on Her Works*. Ed. Laura Ferri. Toronto: Guernica, 2005: p. 25.

7 *Ibid*. pp. 40-1.

8 T.F. Rigelhof. " Stone Dazzling." *Ibid*. p. 54.

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