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Cultural History and the Challenge of Narrativity

KAREN HALTTUNEN

In his unfinished novel titled *The Sense of the Past*, Henry James presents a young historian, Ralph Pendrel, whose greatest desire in life is to arrive at just that sense. "I've been ridden all my life," he says, "by the desire to cultivate some better sense of the past than has mostly seemed sufficient even for those people who have gone in most for cultivating it, and who with most complacency . . . have put forth their results." Lamenting that "recovering the past was at all events . . . much like entering the enemy's lines to get back one's dead for burial," he yearns to find "the unimaginable accidents, the little notes of truth," "evidence of a sort for which there had never been documents enough." And his wishes are answered in 1910 when a distant English cousin who has read and admired his "An Essay in the Aid of Reading History" bequeaths to him an eighteenth-century house in London. Pendrel travels to London to take possession of his legacy, and "on opening the door of the house with his latchkey he lets himself into the Past," entering its interior in the year 1820.¹

But if Pendrel's time machine were to jam, precipitating him into the academic world of the late twentieth century, he would find that his troubles had only just begun. Here he would encounter a challenge far more fundamental than his concern for the qualitative and quantitative limitations of historical documents: the problem of narrative representation as posed by postmodern theory to the historical discipline. "Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning?" asks Hayden White, who labels as fiction the belief that the world is "capable of speaking itself and of displaying itself as a form of a story."² Yet historians, in our efforts to locate

coherence and affirm meaning in the chaotic flux of past experience, deal extensively in storytelling. We enlist the same narrative conventions as fiction writers (especially realist novelists like Pendrel's creator): inventively imposing the time frame of beginning, middle, and end, organizing sequence to convey the sense of consequence, characterizing, scene-setting, emplotting, crafting the "reality effect"—all in the voice of the omniscient narrator speaking from a single, unified point of view. However much we like to think that our narratives emerge from our research findings, "the past," as Louis Mink observes, "is not an untold story."³ The function of historical narrative, like that of any other ideologizing discourse, is not transparently representational but moral and political. Poor Pendrel would have been dismayed above all to learn that history is "a floating signifier."⁴

What then must we do? Narrative theory tends to be more diagnostic than prescriptive, and historians—at least, those who are paying attention—are largely left to *plot* (or otherwise) our own escape from the prison house of language. Must we abandon entirely writing historical narrative? To do so would be to succumb to a naively positivist understanding of truth in rejecting as inadequate anything "fictive," a move that even Michel Foucault refused to make: while admitting, "I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions," he explained that "I do not mean to go so far as to say that fictions are beyond truth [*hors vérité*]."⁵ Nor does Hayden White abandon entirely the truth-value of historical narrative, so long as we understand that its truth-value is not comparable to that of the physical sciences (a benchmark whose usefulness historians of science might contest). The meaning of *fictive* is, of course, merely that which has been fashioned or crafted, not that which is fraudulent: Natalie Zemon Davis notes that "the artifice of fiction did not necessarily lend falsity to an account; it might well bring verisimilitude or a moral truth." And as David Lowenthal observes, "The contingent and discontinuous facts of the past become intelligible only when woven together as stories."⁶

If the primary problem is that we craft narrative without acknowledging that we do so—masking the representational as referential—then the simplest solution is to practice self-reflexivity, acknowledging the fictive quality of our work and openly revealing our chosen tropes and metanarratives that shape it. Davis, for ex-

ample, labeled *The Return of Martin Guerre* “a self-conscious novelization of the past,” explaining how her participation in making the film based on the story influenced her imaginative interpretation and acknowledging: “What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past.”⁷ In *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, Caroline Walker Bynum took such self-awareness one step further, acknowledging not only the fictive quality of her work but also its dominant mode of emplotment. Following Lynn Hunt’s lead in *The New Cultural History*, Bynum characterized her work as history in the “comic mode”: fragmentary (like the medieval bodies she studies), incomplete, open-ended and subject to further revision, loaded with improbabilities and coincidence and compromise, multivocal, and inclined to indulge authorial presence and authorial asides, methodological musings, and even polemic.⁸ Bynum is playfully celebratory of the possibilities opened up by the postmodern challenge.

But self-reflexivity does not necessarily involve self-criticism, or generate alternative representational practices for historians to employ. (It can function as a simple defense mechanism: “You can’t indict me for committing acts of fiction if I charge myself first.”) If the primary problem is not the unacknowledged character of our narratives but rather our unvarying adoption of nineteenth-century realism for all our historical accounts—whatever their content—then the challenge before us is to experiment with new narrative-historical forms. It is, I think, highly unlikely that a significant proportion of historians will return to the annal or chronicle, explore the carnivalesque, experiment with impressionism or surrealism, or turn to poetry; nor is it clear that any of these narrative modes would be any less fictive than realist narrative.⁹ But a few historians have experimented with new narrative constructions that replace the omniscient narrator and the unified point of view with multiple voices and perspectives, abandon unified closure for open endings, highlight gaps and contradictions rather than shoring up their narrative’s “reality effect,” and openly comment on the process of research and interpretation.

One such experiment is Simon Schama’s *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (1991), which weaves together two only coincidentally connected tales of violent death: the death of General James Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec in 1759 and the murder of Dr. George

Parkman at Harvard Medical College in 1849. Schama reports alternative contemporary accounts of these events in different voices, telling the story of Wolfe's death variously through the eye-witness account of an ordinary British soldier, fragments of family correspondence, the heroic mythologization of Wolfe by painter Benjamin West in *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770), and the obsessive identification with Wolfe by historian Francis Parkman, for whom "Past and present dissolved" as "he became Wolfe and Wolfe lived again through him." Schama labels his stories "historical novellas," using both conventional historical documentation and imaginative reconstructions of events—such as that soldier's account of the Battle of Quebec, which Schama confesses only in his afterword to be his own invention. His, he says, is "a work of the imagination that chronicles historical events" rather than a work of scholarship. His purpose is to "play with the teasing gap separating a lived event and its subsequent narration": "And in keeping with the self-disrupting nature of the narratives, I have deliberately dislocated the conventions by which historians establish coherence and persuasiveness."¹⁰

While Schama's study has made available to a wider readership the challenge of postmodernism to conventional historical narrative, his concession that *Dead Certainties* is not a work of scholarship limits its usefulness. More soundly researched is James Goodman's *Stories of Scottsboro*, a study of the notorious case of nine black teenage boys charged with the rape of two young white women in Alabama in 1931. Goodman offers a narrative history of the court case and the decade-long controversy that followed it, by moving through various points of view on all aspects of the case, telling and retelling his Scottsboro stories from the points of view of the accusers, the defendants, most white southerners, liberal white southerners, the southern black middle classes, the Communist Party, the NAACP, and the ACLU, among others. He explains, "I answer the question 'What happened?' with a story about the conflict between people with different ideas about what happened and different ideas about the causes and meaning of what happened—a story about the conflict between people with different stories of Scottsboro." And in a departure from the conventions of purportedly "objective" scholarship, he acknowledges his own powerful role in selecting certain narratives for telling, choosing their central themes, and determining who has the first and last words: "I imposed order—at the very least

beginnings, middles, and ends—where there was rarely order, and created the illusion of stillness, or comprehensible movement, out of the always seamless, often chaotic, flow of consciousness and experience.”¹¹

Even more narratively experimental is John Demos’s *Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America*. “Most of all,” he says in its opening line, “I wanted to write a *story*.”¹² He begins his multicultural account with multiple “Beginnings”—English Puritan emigration, the Iroquois in the 1660s, communal relocation from Dedham to Deerfield, Massachusetts, the birth of his heroine-captive, the death of Charles II in Madrid. And he ends his multicultural account with multiple “Endings,” the three different, ethnographically constructed deaths of the unredeemed captive: her death as Puritan, as Iroquois, and as Catholic. In the lengthy middle of his tale, he alternates verb tense between past and present for different effects, dramatically describes his own experience as scholar holding an important document and captures his mental doubling back and forth between Deerfield in 1704 and Boston in 1990, openly identifies “Some things we have to imagine,” points out gaps and guessings, and offers a single, two-page, italicized imaginative reconstruction of what the captive might have felt when she rejected her English family’s efforts to recover her from her Iroquois husband.¹³ Demos acknowledges the fictive nature of his enterprise without surrendering his claim to scholarship, crafting his tale of multicultural encounter within multiple frames of time and points of view.

But the largest and fastest-growing group of cultural historians are responding to the challenge of postmodernism through intellectual deflection or displacement. Like Winston Smith in George Orwell’s *1984*, we (and I use this pronoun advisedly) respond to the threat of torture—having our own narrative practices torn apart—by shouting, “Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia!” to the narrative practices of the historical cultures we study.¹⁴ An early example of this shift of focus is Natalie Davis’s *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, which uses sixteenth-century pardon tales to examine the storytelling arts of ordinary people. Edmund S. Morgan, in *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*, explores a major historical shift in predominant political fictions for commanding the consent of the governed: the change from the fiction that the king is divine to the fiction

that the voice of the people is the voice of God. Lynn Hunt's *Family Romance of the French Revolution* similarly addresses political narratives (visual as well as verbal, overtly fictional as well as fictively "nonfictional"): the changing tales of the family that shaped and gave meaning to the Revolutionary transformation of political authority. Judith R. Walkowitz, in *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, focuses on narrative "to explore how cultural meanings around sexual danger were produced and disseminated in Victorian society, and what were their cultural and political effects."¹⁵

An unusually creative example of this strategy is Alan Taylor's Pulitzer Prize-winning *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic*.¹⁶ Weaving together three usually separate scholarly genres—a biography of Judge William Cooper, a community study of the frontier town that he founded and shaped to his patriarchal vision, and a literary analysis of his son James Fenimore Cooper's fictional treatment of this founding in his novel *The Pioneers*—Taylor explores the political, social, and cultural consequences of the American Revolution. His focus is narrative making: the judge's own narrative of his self-reinvention as a self-made man, his imposition of that story on the landscape of New York (which he imaginatively depopulated of its Iroquois settlers, and imaginatively stripped of its previous Anglo-American title claimants), and his son's socially embarrassed renarrativization of his father's shady legal dealings, new wealth, and failed gentility, in an effort to restore his family's claim to social preeminence in his fictional village of Templeton. Taylor's own narrative structure is highly complex; rather than pushing his discussion of *The Pioneers* entirely into the final section of his study, where it chronologically belongs, he skillfully weaves it throughout his biography of William Cooper and community study of Cooperstown, constantly viewing those stories through the lens of the popular novelist's treatment and thus locating the precise origins of American frontier mythology as constructed by one of its earliest and most influential craftsmen.

The "fundamental premise" of Taylor's study is "that narratives have power because they are woven into life, not simply imposed upon a chaotic experience after the fact."¹⁷ He acknowledges his debt to philosopher David Carr's *Time, Narrative, and History*, which questions the constructivism of Hayden White and Louis Mink, arguing

that narrative structure is not arbitrarily imposed on the events of the past, but inherent in them. For Carr, our narratives reflect a fundamental property of human consciousness; they are part of the fabric of human life. As Drew Gilpin Faust puts it in her introduction to *Southern Stories: Slaveholders in Peace and War*, "We all live within the stories we tell, for these tales fashion a coherent direction and identity out of the discontinuities of our past, present, and future."¹⁸ In this volume, she offers a collection of "lived stories" told by white southerners to themselves, each other, and the wider world, to provide meaning to their lives and their social order—much like the stories of William and James Fenimore Cooper. "Stripped of the story," writes William Cronon, "we lose track of understanding itself."¹⁹

But the more cultural historians address the narrative practices of the past, the more we risk losing track of the special insights and opportunities presented by postmodern narrative theory. As we domesticate theoretical issues of narrativity to our home discipline, we focus more on content than on what Hayden White calls "the content of the form";²⁰ we address stories rather than emplotment, themes rather than metanarratives, outcomes rather than the construction of sequence and consequence. And we tend to overlook the unique explanatory powers of narrative theory when we attach our fashionably new interest in storytelling to older argumentative frameworks such as Gramscian hegemonic ideology, *mentalité*, even American myth-and-symbol. We can be insufficiently attentive to how narratives get constructed, what distinctive temporal configurations they assume, and why certain metaplots rather than others achieve cultural power.

My own current work seeks to examine past narratives as a "telling" mode of cultural expression, while retaining some of the value of contemporary narratology with its attention to how narratives are constructed. In a study of murder and the Gothic imagination in American culture, I examine the transformation of American non-fictional murder narratives from the late seventeenth century, when the predominant print form for addressing the crime was the execution sermon, to the late nineteenth century, when tales of murder assumed a wide range of genres dominated by the printed murder-trial transcript. Whereas early American sacred literature was concerned not with the nature of the crime but with the spiritual state of the condemned prisoner standing at the gallows, the secular literature that

emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries explored the violent crime itself in close detail. My central argument in this work concerns the historical emergence of the Gothic conventions of *horror* and *mystery*, which, though now regarded as "natural" responses to the revelation of a murder, have in fact shaped a historically recent, liberal-humanitarian, post-Enlightenment response to the crime.²¹

The convention of *mystery* is the one I'd like to address in the present context.²² According to standard literary-historical wisdom, detective fiction was "invented" by Edgar Allan Poe, beginning with his "Murders in the Rue Morgue" in 1841.²³ A remarkable range of the genre's enduring conventions—including the characters of the brilliant and eccentric detective and his admiring, less sharp-witted companion; the blunderings of the police officers assigned to the case; the locked-room murder; the wrongly suspected man; concealment by means of the obvious and solution by means of the unexpected; and so on—"all these sprang full-panoplied from the buzzing brain and lofty brow of the Philadelphia editor."²⁴ If the most important hallmark of detective fiction is understood to be the detective, such an argument is not surprising, for police detectives did not make their appearance in American law enforcement until the 1830s and 1840s. But narratologists have gone to some trouble to demonstrate that detective fiction practices what Frank Kermode calls a "peculiar distortion of more usual narrative conventions."²⁵ The "characteristic action of all detective fiction," according to Alfred Hutter, is "the restatement and restructuring in the present of a past event." Similarly, David Lehman notes that detective stories "begin with the recent impact of a crime and work backward to restructure the incomplete fragments of present knowledge into a more intelligible whole and consequently to explain the past."²⁶ In the terms established by narratologist Gerard Genette, detective fiction plays on the distinction in narrative between *histoire*, the sequence in which the events in question actually occurred, and *récit*, the order of events as presented in the text.²⁷ And it works on two different levels at once: on the surface openly narrating the story of an investigation, while gradually bringing to light the hidden story of the crime.²⁸

Half a century before the appearance of either real police detectives or Poe's fictional amateur Auguste Dupin, nonfictional ac-

counts of murders in America began to exhibit the characteristic features of detective-fiction narrative. The first such case I have located concerns the murder of six-year-old Eunice Bolles by twelve-year-old Hannah Ocuish in New London, Connecticut, in 1786. The Rev. Henry Channing preached the condemned girl's execution sermon, a classic example of its genre, which warned parents and masters not to neglect the religious instruction of children. But appended to that sermon was a brief account of the crime which began as follows: "On the 21st of July, 1786, at about 10 o'clock in the morning, the body of the murdered child was found in the public road leading from New-London to Norwich."²⁹ The account went on to trace the investigation that followed: the neighborhood turned out to hunt for the murderer; Hannah was questioned and claimed that she had seen four boys near the scene of the crime. When a search failed to turn them up, Hannah was questioned again, and then taken to the Bolles home to be charged with the crime in the presence of the dead child. She burst into tears and confessed. And only at this late point in the story is the reader offered a sequential account of the crime: Five weeks earlier, Eunice had reported Hannah for stealing fruit during the strawberry harvest, and Hannah had plotted revenge. Catching sight of her young enemy headed for school one morning, Hannah lured Eunice from her path with a gift of calico, then beat and choked her to death.

While this is not a detective story—the community itself serves as the detecting agent—it is a murder mystery: it begins with its own end point, a dead body, then moves into the past to describe the investigation into the death, slowly closes in on the identity of the murderer, and only at last recounts the sequence of events culminating in the murder, coming full circle in the end to its own starting point, a dead body. This strikingly new way to tell the tale of a murder was an early expression of the emerging legal discourse of the crime that was replacing the earlier theological discourse. In the last decades of the eighteenth century, murder-trial transcripts began to appear in print, along with hybrid accounts that included the murder trial as one of their central concerns. And in the early nineteenth century, a third category of legal narrative emerged: the trial fragment (e.g., the closing for the defense, the judge's charge to the jury) or legal commentary on the trial. Comprising just 15 percent of all murder narratives printed before 1789, this legal literature steadily rose in propor-

tion after 1790, reaching a level of 66 percent in the 1820s and staying there for the duration of the nineteenth century.³⁰

The emerging legal discourse of murder contributed to a new moral uncertainty concerning the crime. The classic execution sermon, by its nature and timing, had assumed the guilt of the convicted murderer, within a religious culture that held to the English adage that "Murder will out" because of the Providential eye that sees all sins and the Providential hand that discovers them to public view. By contrast, trial reports and other legal accounts made the guilt of the accused murderer their central problematic, and they did not invariably offer sure moral closure to the case in question. After all, some murder trials resulted in acquittals, others in convictions followed by executive pardons or reprieves, and still others in retrials that themselves led to acquittals. Even murder trials resulting in convictions could introduce considerable moral uncertainty into their tales of the crime, owing to the peculiar nature of the courtroom trial as narrative. Trials were chronologically nonlinear, doubling back and forth on themselves across time. They were usually incomplete, leaving gaps in the narrative because they relied on circumstantial evidence. They generated internal conflict: when different witnesses testified at cross purposes, when individual witnesses contradicted their own testimony, and when indictments themselves offered several mutually exclusive stories in an effort to cover all legal bets.

The discourse of the law led to the cultural construction of murder as mystery in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, in a narrative process that spilled over from formally legal accounts of the crime into the larger popular literature. This process explains, first of all, the peculiar narrative strategy of the Hannah Ocuish account, which echoed courtroom narrative: beginning with the *corpus delicti* (the indictment), advancing through a reconstruction of fragments from the past (trial testimony), and postponing to its conclusion a proper *histoire* or sequential relation of events (the attorneys' closing statements). That narrative strategy grew increasingly common in the first half of the nineteenth century. Significantly, editorial prefaces to printed trial reports sometimes used the format, opening with lines such as this: "On the evening of the sixth of April 1830, Mr. Joseph White, a rich and respectable citizen of Salem, Massachusetts, retired to bed at his usual hour of about nine o'clock. . . . In

the morning he was found dead in his bed. . . . [T]he motives of the murderer were wrapped in mystery."³¹ The spillover of mystery from the legal narratives also accounts for the increasing vogue of phrases such as "Mysterious Murder," "Mysterious Disappearance," and "Mysterious Affair" in crime literature titles, and a new tendency to label cases "the Burdell Mystery" or "the Udderzook Mystery!"³²

The growing concern for mystery emerging from the new legal narrative of murder also led crime writers (and criminal attorneys as well) to borrow liberally from Gothic fiction a range of motifs and conventions used to enhance the "mysterious" nature of the crime: "veiled lady" murderesses and even veiled witnesses drew special attention;³³ missing corpses, temporarily mislaid corpses (the "barrel mystery" and the "great trunk mystery"), and presumed corpses that came back to life (as in an account titled *Mystery Developed* about the Boorn-Colvin case in Vermont);³⁴ and sudden intrusions of the supernatural, including ghostly visitations by the victim, "birds of warning," and phantom lanterns in graveyards.³⁵ These Gothic conventions were employed to lend meaning and coherence to nineteenth-century murder narratives, but it was a peculiar kind of coherence, arising from the exigencies of narrative incoherence and moral uncertainty stemming from the new legal discourse.

One of the most important characteristics of the new murder mystery was the new demands it placed on readers, requiring that they play an active role in shaping the narrative and assigning guilt for the crime. Whereas execution sermons had required only that readers accept on clerical (and ultimately divine) authority their official version of a unified and uncontestable truth, the new legal narratives effectively treated readers as jurors who must cast a vote for conviction or acquittal. The anonymous reader who wrote in the margin of a convicted murderer's printed self-exculpation, "This statement is universally regarded as a lie from beginning to end," was responding to this expectation of his role as reader.³⁶ But murder mysteries required that readers do more than just vote. They made readers actively shape the narrative, sifting through evidence, piecing the fragments together, tracking, detecting, probing, "unveiling"—effectively taking on themselves the responsibility for crafting the master narrative of the event after the withdrawal of the Providential Narrator. To this end, the murder mystery narrative pulled readers

into the investigation of the crime, offering visual illustrations of key evidence, and graphic illustrations of scenes of the crime—both architectural facades and interior scenes, maps aimed at assisting the readers in reconstructing the crime in three-dimensional space, and architectural floor plans that paid special attention to the murderer's mode of access (the rear window, the unlocked door), sometimes tracking his path with a dotted line, increasingly noting the precise location of the victim's body.³⁷

In this new visual-spatial reconstruction of the murder, the narrative responsibilities of the Providential eye were effectively passed on to the "private eyes" of the ordinary reader, who was required to penetrate visually the secret spaces where the crime had taken place, to try to achieve the narrative mastery once commanded by God. But significantly, the reader's effort to dispel the mystery through such reconstruction was doomed to failure. The murder mystery ensured that there would be no moral certainty about either the nature of the crime or the assignment of guilt. There could be no narrative closure, no omniscient account, because legal truth was problematic and contestable, and reasonable doubt worked like an acid on coherent narrative.

This transfer of the burden of knowledge from the Providential eye to the private reader's eyes helps explain the deep power of detective fiction in modern secular culture. Once we understand that the cultural construction of murder-as-mystery preceded the "invention" of detective fiction, the way is cleared to understanding how detective fiction offered a fantasized solution to the problem of moral uncertainty in the world of true crime. For the Heroic Detective of detective fiction did exercise Providential powers of vision and agency. His French archetype, Eugene-François Vidocq, boasted in his heavily fictionalized memoirs in 1829, "Nothing escaped me—I knew all that was passing or projecting." His American prototype Auguste Dupin solved the mystery of Marie Roget without ever leaving his armchair. The English Inspector Bucket, from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, entered rooms magically, read people's minds (as did Dupin), and seemed to be, in the words of Jo the crossing-sweeper, "in all manner of places, all at wanst."³⁸ Omnipresent, omniscient, all-powerful: a clear line of descent ran from the Providential eye of the execution sermon to the "private eye" of detective fiction (whose name came from the advertising logo of the Pinkerton

Detective Agency—a single large eyeball surrounded by the words “The eye that never sleeps”).³⁹ The Heroic Detective was equal to the task of constructing a full and authoritative narrative of the crime, thus removing the narrative burden from the shoulders of the ordinary reader and restoring moral certainty to the world.⁴⁰ But the Heroic Detective was, after all, just a fiction. In the real world of true crime, moral uncertainty remained.

The cultural construction of murder-as-mystery, I argue, has important implications for the modern liberal understanding of the problem of human evil. For early New Englanders committed to a doctrine of innate depravity, evil was no mystery; it was a terrible and universal component of human nature in the postlapsarian world. The Gothic understanding of evil that was emerging in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century America, by contrast, rested on the elusiveness of evil within a liberal post-Enlightenment worldview that shrank from attributing radical evil to human nature, instead treating every person as innocent unless proved guilty. The murder mystery stressed the moral incomprehensibility of this radical act of transgression in a liberal world, and the question “How did this happen?” shaded readily into the question “How could this possibly have happened?” Just as the new cult of horror made murder unspeakable, incomprehensible, inexplicable, the cult of mystery made murder infinitely elusive, incomprehensible, inexplicable. Together, mystery and horror worked to construct the modern murderer as moral monster, located outside the pale of “normal” human nature. And the cult of mystery might itself have eluded my historical attention, veiled as it was in the guise of a peculiar narrative convention, had I not been able to apply some of the insights of post-modern narratology.

The new tendency of historians to practice self-conscious self-reflexivity about our fictive constructions is no doubt salutary, and various experiments in historical narrativization have fruitfully opened up some of the new possibilities suggested by postmodernism, loosening our characteristic death grip on novelistic realism. But in the longer run, historians remain more or less happily caught in the web of narrative—resolutely committed, for the most part, to the narrative form, and unconvinced that any other representational practice

would prove any less problematic, fictive, and ideologically loaded. At this point, it would seem that postmodern narrative theory has exerted a greater impact on what we study than on how we write about what we study. My modest suggestion here is that this contribution to cultural history is a valuable one, particularly if we can meet the challenge of applying some of the theoretical insights of narratology to the past narrative practices we explore.

NOTES

1. Henry James, *The Sense of the Past* (New York, 1923), pp. 32, 49, 292 (the last quote is from James's notes on the unfinished work). Simon Schama uses James's *Sense of the Past* to clarify the problems of historical narrative in the afterword to his *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York, 1991), pp. 319–20, discussed later in this chapter.

2. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1981), 23.

3. Louis O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison, Wis., 1978), p. 148.

4. The major voice articulating these issues has been Hayden White's; see especially his essays in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987). For some useful overviews of the problem, see William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (1992): 1347–76; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), pp. 231–37.

5. Foucault is quoted in Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 235, 234.

6. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987), p. 4; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 218.

7. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 77, 5.

8. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), p. 10; Lynn Hunt, "Introduction: History, Culture, and Text," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), p. 22. In their observations about historical narrative in the comic mode, both Bynum and Hunt reveal the influence of Hayden White's pathbreaking work, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973).

9. These are some of the alternative narrative forms suggested by Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra. For a useful discussion of their calls for historical experimentation with new narrative practices, see Lloyd S.

Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra," in Hunt, ed., *New Cultural History*, pp. 97–128.

10. Schama, *Dead Certainties*, pp. 64, 322, 320, 321.
11. James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, 1994), pp. xii, xiii.
12. John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York, 1995), p. xi.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 17, 108–9.
14. George Orwell, *1984* (San Diego, 1977 [1949]), p. 289. For a superb discussion of this growing historical attention to "cultural narratives" and its complex intellectual origins, see Sarah Maza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 1493–515.
15. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives*; Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York, 1988); Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992); Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992), p. 83.
16. Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1996).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
18. Drew Gilpin Faust, *Southern Stories: Slaveholders in Peace and War* (Columbia, Mo., 1992), p. 2; David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986).
19. Cronon, "Place for Stories," p. 1369.
20. White, *Content of the Form*.
21. See Karen Halttunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), and Karen Halttunen, "Early American Murder Narratives: The Birth of Horror," in *The Power of Culture: Critical Essays in American History*, ed. Richard W. Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (Chicago, 1993), pp. 67–101.
22. This portion of my work has appeared in "Divine Providence and Dr. Parkman's Jawbone: The Cultural Construction of Murder as Mystery," *Ideas from the National Humanities Center* 4 (1996): 4–21.
23. Martin Priestman, *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet* (New York Press, 1991), p. 36.
24. Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York, 1941), p. 12.
25. Frank Kermode, "Novel and Narrative," in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*, ed. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe (New York, 1983), p. 180.
26. Alfred D. Hutter, "Dreams, Transformations, and Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction," in Most and Stowe, eds., *Poetics of Murder*, pp. 231–32; David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection* (New York, 1989), p. 1.
27. In Russian Formalist terms, the distinction is between "plot" and

"story." Indeed, this peculiarity of detective fiction makes it a favorite example of literary critics exploring questions of narratology: in order to clarify the distinction between plot and story, for example, Terry Eagleton explains that "a detective story usually opens with the discovery of a body and finally backtracks to expose how the murder happened, but this plot of events reverses the 'story' or actual chronology of the action"; see *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983), p. 105. The efflorescence of literary criticism of detective fiction in recent years owes much to its provision of "ideal material for theorists of plot and of narration"; see Most and Stowe, introduction to their *Poetics of Murder*, p. xii.

28. Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction," in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 42–52; Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven, 1981), chap. 2.

29. Henry Channing, *God admonishing his people of their duty, as parents and masters, a sermon preached at New-London, December 20th, 1786. Occasioned by the execution of Hannah Ocuish, a mulatto girl, aged 12 years and 9 months. For the murder of Eunice Bolles, aged six years and six months* (New London, Conn., 1786), 29–30.

30. These figures are based on a categorization and counting of the 1,126 entries in Thomas McDade, *The Annals of Murder: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on American Murders from Colonial Times to 1900* (Norman, Okla., 1961).

31. *The Most Important Testimony adduced on the Trial of John Francis Knapp . . .* (Providence, R.I., 1830), iv.

32. A brief narrative of the trial for the bloody and mysterious murder of the unfortunate young woman, in the famous Manhattan well . . . (N.p., n.d.); A true and faithful account of the most material circumstances attending the mysterious disappearance of Samuel Field and Francis C. Jenkerson . . . (Providence, R.I., 1830); Trial of Stephen and Jesse Boorn, for the murder of Russell Colvin . . . with some other interesting particulars, relating to this mysterious affair . . . (Rutland, Vt., [1819]); *The Princeton Murder: The Burdell mystery unraveled . . .* (New York, 1863); *The Udderzook mystery!* (Philadelphia, 1873).

33. *The Life and Confessions of Mrs. Henrietta Robinson, the Veiled Murderess! . . .* (Boston, 1855); *The veiled lady; or, the mysterious witness in the McFarland trial . . .* (Philadelphia, [1870?]).

34. *Life, trial and execution of Edward H. Ruloff . . .* (Philadelphia, 1871); E. H. Freeman, *The veil of secrecy removed . . .* (Binghamton, N.Y., 1871); "The Barrel Mystery" . . . (Chicago, 1859); *The great "trunk mystery" of New York City . . .* (Philadelphia, 1871); *Mystery developed; or, Russell Colvin, (supposed to be murdered,) in full life: and Stephen and Jesse Boorn, (his convicted murderers,) rescued from ignominious death . . .* (Hartford, 1820).

35. See, e.g., *The Life and Death of Mrs. Maria Bickford . . .* (Boston, 1846), p. 16; *The Lives of Helen Jewett, and Richard P. Robinson* (New York, 1849), p. 50; *Mystery developed*, p. 16; *The Dying Confession of John Lechler, who was convicted for the murder of his wife, Mary Lechler . . .* (Lancaster, Pa., 1822), pp. 11–12;

Awful Disclosures! The Life and Confessions of Andress Hall (Troy, [N.Y.], 1849), p. 12; *The Confession of Adam Horn* . . . (Baltimore, 1843), p. vi.

36. Thomas McDade notes this marginal comment, in his entry for *Statement of James E. Eldredge, convicted for the murder of Sarah Jane Gould* (Canton, N.Y., 1859), in *Annals of Murder*, p. 85.

37. See, e.g., *A report of the evidence and points of law, arising in the trial of John Francis Knapp* . . . (Salem, [Mass.], 1830), frontis.; *The Manheim Tragedy: A complete history of the double murder of Mrs. Garber and Mrs. Ream* . . . (Lancaster, Pa., 1858), opposite p. 6; *Tragedies on the land, containing an authentic account of the most awful murders that have been committed in this country* . . . (Philadelphia, 1841), pp. 143–51, 129; *Trial of Reuben Dunbar, for the Murder of Stephen V. Lester and David L. Lester* . . . (Albany, N.Y., 1850), opposite p. 3; *A Minute and Correct Account of the Trial of Lucian Hall* . . . (Middletown, Conn., 1844), p. 18.

38. See Ian Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven: The Detective in English Fiction from Godwin to Doyle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 48, 99, 103.

39. See Frank Morn, *"The Eye That Never Sleeps": A History of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency* (Bloomington, Ind., 1982).

40. Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven*, p. 21.