RE-PRESENTING THE PAST

‘TOTAL HISTORY’ DE-TOTALIZED

In the light of recent work in many theoretical areas, we have seen that narrative has come to be acknowledged as, above all, a human-made structure – never as ‘natural’ or given. Whether it be in historical or fictional representation, the familiar narrative form of beginning, middle, and end implies a structuring process that imparts meaning as well as order. The notion of its ‘end’ suggests both teleology and closure and, of course, both of these are concepts that have come under considerable scrutiny in recent years, in philosophical and literary circles alike. The view of narrative that so much current theory challenges is not new, but it has been given a new designation: it is considered a mode of ‘totalizing’ representation.

The function of the term totalizing, as I understand it, is to point to the process (hence the awkward ‘ing’ form) by which writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified – but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even at the risk of doing violence to them. It is this link to power, as well as process, that the adjective ‘totalizing’ is meant to suggest, and it is as such that the term has been used to characterize everything from liberal humanist ideals to the aims of historiography. As Dominick LaCapra has pointed out, the
dream of a ‘total history’ corroborating the historian’s own desire for mastery of a documentary repertoire and furnishing the reader with a vicarious sense of – or perhaps a project for – control in a world out of joint has of course been a lodestar of historiography from Hegel to the Annales school.

(LaCapra 1985: 25)

Witness Annales historian Fernand Braudel’s stated aim: ‘Everything must be recaptured and relocated in the general framework of history, so that despite the difficulties, the fundamental paradoxes and contradictions, we may respect the unity of history which is also the unity of life’ (Braudel 1980: 16). Totalizing narrative representation has also, of course, been considered by some critics as the defining characteristic of the novel as a genre, ever since its beginnings in the overt controlling and ordering (and fictionalizing) of Cervantes and Sterne.

In very general terms, the postmodern questioning of this totalizing impulse may well have its roots in some sort of 1960s’ or late romantic need to privilege free, unconditioned experience. But this need seems to be countered these days by an equally strong terror that it is really someone else – rather than we ourselves – who is plotting, ordering, controlling our life for us. British-based critics tend to localize as a particularly American phenomenon a paradoxical desire for and suspicion of totalization, and the work of writers like Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon certainly explains why they do so. But there are equally powerful examples of the postmodern paradox of anti-totalizing totalization in resolutely non-American novels such as Midnight’s Children, The Name of the Rose, or The White Hotel, novels which structurally both install and subvert the teleology, closure, and causality of narrative, both historical and fictive.

A similar and equally contradictory impulse can be seen in postmodern narrative photography – the same doubled urge, ironically playing with conventions in order to turn the apparent veracity of photography against itself. The overt self-reflexivity in the work of Duane Michaels, for example, points to his various series of photographs as self-consciously composed, fictionalized, and manipulated, but the images themselves nevertheless also function as seemingly transparent documentary representations within a temporal
framework. This contradictory conjunction of the self-reflexive and the documentary is precisely what characterizes the postmodern return to story in poetry as well. Marjorie Perloff (1985: 158) has argued that much recent narrative poetry challenges the modernist or late romantic separation of lyric poetry and narrative prose by foregrounding both the narrative codes and their (and our) desire for closure as well as for the order usually implied by systematic plot structure. What this means is that – as in fiction – there is an opening up of poetry to material once excluded from the genre as impure: things political, ethical, historical, philosophical. This kind of verse can also work to contest representation and the traditional notion of the transparent referentiality of language in its problematizing of narrative form, and as such resembles, in its effect, historiographic metafiction.

In all these cases, there is an urge to foreground, by means of contradiction, the paradox of the desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery – and master narratives. Historiography too is no longer considered the objective and disinterested recording of the past; it is more an attempt to comprehend and master it by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that, in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past. What historiographic metafictions like *Waterland* or *I the Supreme* ask, as we have seen, is whether the historian discovers or invents the totalizing narrative form or model used. Of course, both discovery and invention would involve some recourse to artifice and imagination, but there is a significant difference in the epistemological value traditionally attached to the two acts. It is this distinction that postmodernism problematizes.

The totalizing impulse that postmodern art both inscribes and challenges should probably not be regarded either, on the one hand, as a naive kind of deliberately imperialistic desire for total control or, on the other, as utterly unavoidable and humanly inevitable, even necessary. The motivation and even existence of such totalization may certainly remain unconscious and repressed (or at least unspoken) or they may be completely overt, as in Fredric Jameson’s deliberate totalizing in the name of Marxism as the only ‘philosophically coherent and ideologically compelling resolution’ to the dilemmas of historicism (1981: 18). But Jameson’s ‘History’ as ‘uninterrupted narrative,’ however repressed, is exactly what is contested by the plural, interrupted,
unrepressed histories (in the plural) of novels like Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.

That novel’s postmodern narrating historian might be seen as indirectly suggesting that not even Marxism can fully subsume all other interpretive modes. In his postmodern storytelling there is no mediation that can act as a dialectical term for establishing relationships between narrative form and social ground. They both remain and they remain separate. The resulting contradictions are not dialectically resolved, but coexist in a heterogeneous way: Rushdie’s novel, in fact, works to prevent any interpretation of its contradictions as simply the outer discontinuous signs of some repressed unity – such as Marxist ‘History’ or ‘the Real.’ In fact, a novel like *Midnight’s Children* works to foreground the totalizing impulse of western – imperialistic – modes of history-writing by confronting it with indigenous Indian models of history. Though Saleem Sinai narrates in English, in ‘Anglepoised-lit writing,’ his intertexts for both writing history and writing fiction are doubled: they are, on the one hand, from Indian legends, films, and literature and, on the other, from the west – *The Tin Drum*, *Tristram Shandy*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and so on.

Rushdie’s paradoxically anti-totalizing totalized image for his historiographic metafictive process is the ‘chutnification of history’ (Rushdie 1981: 459). Each chapter of the novel, we are told, is like a pickle jar that shapes its contents by its very form. The cliché with which Saleem is clearly playing is that to understand him and his nation, we ‘have to swallow a world’ and swallow too his literally preposterous story. But chutnification is also an image of preserving: ‘my chutneys and kasaundies are, after all, connected to my nocturnal scribblings. . . . Memory, as well as fruit, is being saved from the corruption of the clocks’ (38). In both processes, however, he acknowledges inevitable distortions: raw materials are transformed, given ‘shape and form – that is to say, meaning’ (461). This is as true of history-writing as it is of novel-writing. As Saleem himself acknowledges:

> Sometimes in the pickles’ version of history, Saleem appears to have known too little; at other times, too much . . . yes, I should revise and revise, improve and improve; but there is neither the time nor the
energy. I am obliged to offer no more than this stubborn sentence: It happened that way because that’s how it happened.

(Rushdie 1981: 560–1)

But does that opening ‘It’ of the last statement refer to the events of the past or to the writing and preserving of them? In a novel about a man writing his own and his country’s history, a man ‘desperate’ for meaning, as he insists he is from the first paragraph, the answer cannot be clear.

To challenge the impulse to totalize is to contest the entire notion of continuity in history and its writing. In Foucault’s terms discontinuity, once the ‘stigma of temporal dislocation’ that it was the historian’s professional job to remove from history, has become a new instrument of historical analysis and simultaneously a result of that analysis. Instead of seeking common denominators and homogeneous networks of causality and analogy, historians have been freed, Foucault argues, to note the dispersing interplay of different, heterogeneous discourses that acknowledge the undecidable in both the past and our knowledge of the past. What has surfaced is something different from the unitary, closed, evolutionary narratives of historiography as we have traditionally known it: as we have been seeing in historiographic metafiction as well, we now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men.

These are among the issues raised by postmodern fiction in its paradoxical confrontation of self-consciously fictive and resolutely historical representation. The narrativization of past events is not hidden; the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed – not found – order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure. The process of making stories out of chronicles, of constructing plots out of sequences, is what postmodern fiction underlines. This does not in any way deny the existence of the past real, but it focuses attention on the act of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation.

Among the lessons taught by this didactic postmodern fiction is that
of the importance of context, of discursive situation, in the narrativizing acts of both fiction and historiography: novels like Timothy Findley’s *Famous Last Words* or Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* teach us that both forms of narrative representation are, in fact, particularized uses of language (i.e. discourses) that inscribe social and ideological contexts. While both historians and novelists (not to mention literary critics) have a long tradition of trying to erase textual elements which would ‘situate’ them in their texts, postmodernism refuses such an obfuscation of the context of its enunciation. The particularizing and contextualizing that characterize the postmodern focus are, of course, direct responses to those strong (and very common) totalizing and universalizing impulses. But the resulting postmodern relativity and provisionality are not causes for despair; they are to be acknowledged as perhaps the very conditions of historical knowledge. Historical meaning may thus be seen today as unstable, contextual, relational, and provisional, but postmodernism argues that, in fact, it has always been so. And it uses novelistic representations to underline the narrative nature of much of that knowledge.

As Lyotard argued in *The Postmodern Condition*, narrative is still the quintessential way we represent knowledge and this explains why the denigration of narrative knowledge by positivistic science has provoked such a strong response from so many different domains and points of view. In many fields, narrative is, and always has been, a valid mode of explanation, and historians have always availed themselves of its ordering as well as its explanatory powers.

This is not unrelated to Collingwood’s early notion that the historian’s job is to tell plausible stories, made out of the mess of fragmentary and incomplete facts, facts which he or she processes and to which he or she thereby grants meaning through emplotment. Hayden White, of course, goes even further and points to how historians suppress, repeat, subordinate, highlight, and order those facts, but once again, the result is to endow the events of the past with a certain meaning. To call this act a literary act is, for White, in no way to detract from its significance. However, what contradictory postmodern fiction shows is how such meaning-granting can be undermined even as it is asserted. In Pynchon’s *V.*, for instance, the writing of history is seen as an ultimately futile attempt to form experience into meaning. The
multiple and peripheral perspectives offered in the fiction’s eyewitness accounts resist any final meaningful closure. And despite the recognizable historical context (of the Cold War years and their paranoia or of German policies in southwest Africa), the past still resists complete human understanding. A plot, be it seen as a narrative structure or as a conspiracy, is always a totalizing representation that integrates multiple and scattered events into one unified story. But the simultaneous desire for and suspicion of such representations are both part of the postmodern contradictory response to emplotment.

In writing about historical events, both the emplotting historian and the novelist are usually considered as working within certain constraints — those of chronology, for instance. But what happens when postmodern fiction ‘de-doxifies’ even such obvious and ‘natural’ constraints, when Midnight’s Children’s narrator notices an error in chronology in his narrative, but then decides, ‘in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time’? Later he also inverts the order of his own tenth birthday and the 1957 election, and keeps that order because his memory stubbornly refuses to alter the sequence of events. Rushdie offers no real answer to the questions Saleem poses, but the issues are raised in such an overt manner that we too are asked to confront them. Worried about that error in the date of Gandhi’s death, Saleem asks us:

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I’m prepared to distort everything — to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can’t judge. I’ll have to leave it to others.

(Rushdie 1981: 166)

Well, others (like us) are indeed left to ask — but not only of this particular error within this particular novel — if one error would invalidate the entire fabric of representation in history or fiction.

Another question: in the drive to totalize and give unified meaning to historiography as well as fiction, are elisions (if not errors) not likely to occur which would condition the ‘truth to fact’ of any representation of the past? Related issues are certainly being discussed in Marxist
and feminist theory today, but they also come up in a novel like John Berger’s rather didactic G. Here, the narrator intervenes in the middle of a description of a fictive character caught up in a real historical event:

I cannot continue this account of the eleven-year-old boy in Milan on 6 May 1898. From this point on everything I write will either converge upon a final full stop or else disperse so widely that it will become incoherent. Yet there was no such convergence and no incoherence. To stop here, despite all that I leave unsaid, is to admit more of the truth than will be possible if I bring the account to a conclusion. The writer’s desire to finish is fatal to the truth. The End unifies. Unity must be established in another way. (Berger 1972b: 77)

The only other way offered here is the representation of the brute data of historical event (the number of dead workers in the Milan uprising) and their political consequences – ‘the end of a phase of Italian history’ and the initiation of a new one which meant that ‘crude repression gave way to political manipulation’ (77) which kept suppressed any revolutionary urges for at least twenty years.

While this is as much an ‘End’ and a ‘Unity’ as those of the fictive narrative would have been, it does act to foreground the postmodern suspicion of closure, of both its arbitrariness and its foreclosing interpretive power. Perhaps this explains the multiple endings of E.L. Doctorow’s fictionalizing of the Rosenbergs’ history in The Book of Daniel. Various plot and thematic threads are rather problematically tied up, but in such an overt way that they point to suspicious continuity as much as relativized finality. In one ending Daniel goes back to the site of past trauma, the house of his parents who have been executed for treason, only to find the quality of life there worse, perhaps, than that of his experience: in the life of the poor black inhabitants, however, he sees a continuity of suffering that forbids him to wallow in personal pain. Another ending presents his sister’s funeral, complete with paid prayers, offering a Kaddish for all the dead, past and present, of Daniel’s life and this novel. And in yet another ending, as he sits in the Columbia University library stacks in May 1968, writing the
dissertation/novel/journal/confession we read, he is told to 'Close the book, man,' for the revolution has begun, and its locus is life, not books. As he writes the last pages we read, the book and this ending self-consciously self-destruct in a manner reminiscent of the final page of One Hundred Years of Solitude. And, of course, the very last words we actually read are those of yet another 'Book of Daniel' – the biblical one.

Postmodern fiction like this exploits and yet simultaneously calls into question notions of closure, totalization, and universality that are part of those challenged grand narratives. Rather than seeing this paradoxical use and abuse as a sign of decadence or as a cause for despair, it might be possible to postulate a less negative interpretation that would allow for at least the potential for radical critical possibilities. Perhaps we need a rethinking of the social and political (as well as the literary and historical) representations by which we understand our world. Maybe we need to stop trying to find totalizing narratives which dissolve difference and contradiction (into, for instance, either humanist eternal Truth or Marxist dialectic).

KNOWING THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

Among the unresolved contradictions of representation in postmodern fiction is that of the relation between the past and the present. In The Book of Daniel, various stands on this issue are thematized: the 1960s’ revolutionary, Artie Sternlicht, rejects the past in the name of the present and future; Susan lives too much in the past and dies for it; Daniel tries to sort out the past in order to understand his present. This relationship is one that has preoccupied historiography since at least the last century. Historians are aware that they establish a relationship between the past they write about and the present in which they write. The past may have appeared as confused, plural, and unstructured as the present does as it was lived, but the historians’ task is to order this fragmented experience into knowledge: ‘For the whole point of history is not to know about actions as witnesses might, but as historians do, in connection with later events and as parts of temporal wholes’ (Danto 1965: 185). In historiographic metafiction, it is this same realization that underlies the frequent use of anachronisms, where earlier historical
characters speak the concepts and language clearly belonging to later figures (as in Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus* or Doctorow’s *Ragtime*).

For the most part historiographic metafiction, like much contemporary theory of history, does not fall into either ‘presentism’ or nostalgia in its relation to the past it represents. What it does is de-naturalize that temporal relationship. In both historiographic theory and postmodern fiction, there is an intense self-consciousness (both theoretical and textual) about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past, about the conjunction of present action and the past absent object of that agency. In both historical and literary postmodern representation, the doubleness remains; there is no sense of either historian or novelist reducing the strange past to verisimilar present. The contemporary resonances of the narration of a historical period piece like Natalie Zemon Davis’s book (or film) of *The Return of Martin Guerre* coexist with their counter-expectation in the form of the challenge to our romantic clichéd conventions of love conquering all. This is deliberately doubly coded narrative, just as postmodern architecture is a doubly coded form: they are historical and contemporary. There is no dialectic resolution or recuperation in either case.

Works like Coover’s *The Public Burning* or Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* do not rewrite, refashion, or expropriate history merely to satisfy either some game-playing or some totalizing impulse; instead, they juxtapose what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge. Which ‘facts’ make it into history? And whose facts? The narrating ‘historian’ of Rushdie’s *Shame* finds that he has trouble keeping his present knowledge of events from contaminating his representation of the past. This is the condition of all writing about the past, whether fictional (‘it seems that the future cannot be restrained, and insists on seeping back into the past’ (Rushdie 1983: 24)) or factual (‘It is possible to see the subsequent history of Pakistan as a duel between two layers of time, the obscured world forcing its way back through what-had-been-imposed’ (87)). The narrator knows that it ‘is the true desire of every artist to impose his or her vision on the world’ (87). He goes on to ponder this similarity of impulse between historical and fictional writing: ‘I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to
dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change’ (87–8). What he knows complicates his narrative task in that he is dealing with a past ‘that refuses to be suppressed, that is daily doing battle with the present’ (88), both in his novel and in the actual, present-day history of Pakistan. He even admits that the inspiration for his fictive investigation of the notion of shame came from a real newspaper account of a murder in London of a Pakistani girl by her own father (116) – or so he says. The present and the past, the fictive and the factual: the boundaries may frequently be transgressed in postmodern fiction, but there is never any resolution of the ensuing contradictions. In other words, the boundaries remain, even if they are challenged.

It is at this level that these epistemological questions of postmodern narrative representation are posed. How can the present know the past it tells? We constantly narrate the past, but what are the conditions of the knowledge implied by that totalizing act of narration? Must a historical account acknowledge where it does not know for sure or is it allowed to guess? Do we know the past only through the present? Or is it a matter of only being able to understand the present through the past? As we have seen, these confusing questions are those raised by postmodern novels like Graham Swift’s Waterland. In the opposition between the history-teacher narrator and his present-oriented students are enacted the conflicts of contemporary historiographic debate. For the narrator, ‘life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson’ (Swift 1983: 52), but it is that one-tenth that has taught him ‘that history was no invention but indeed existed – and I had become part of it’ (53). The novel’s fens landscape opposes the flux of water (an image of both time and space) to the attempt at fixity by land reclamation – and also by the discipline of history (both as memory and as story-telling). The question is never whether the events of the past actually took place. The past did exist – independently of our capacity to know it. Historiographic metafiction accepts this philosophically realist view of the past and then proceeds to confront it with an anti-realist one that suggests that, however true that independence may be, nevertheless the past exists for us – now – only as traces on and in the present. The absent past can only be inferred from circumstantial evidence.
The tensions created by this realization that we can likely only know the past through our present do not absolve postmodern historians or novelists from trying to avoid dissolving those tensions, no matter how uncomfortable they might make them. This, of course, was one of the lessons of Brecht:

we must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different; so that they all look more or less like our own, which then acquires from this process a certain air of having been there all along, in other words, of permanence pure and simple. Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be seen to be impermanent too.

(Brecht 1964: 190)

Postmodern fiction stresses even more than this (if that is possible) the tensions that exist, on the one hand, between the pastness (and absence) of the past and the presentness (and presence) of the present, and on the other, between the actual events of the past and the historian’s act of processing them into facts. The anachronistic intertextual references to modern works of science, philosophy, and aesthetics in Banville’s Doctor Copericus point to the contemporary relevance of the issues also raised in the sixteenth century: the relations between theory and praxis, words and things, science and the universe. But because the manner in which these questions are presented is self-consciously anachronistic, the text also points at the same time to the novelist’s act of making past/present connections in such a way that there is still a radical discontinuity between then and now, between experiencing and knowing.

Knowing the past becomes a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording. Just as the Rankean objectivity theory of history-writing was challenged by Hegel, Droysen, Nietzsche, Croce, and so many others, so the metafictional aspects of historiographic metafiction also highlight the areas in which interpretation enters the domain of historiographic representation (in the choice of narrative strategy, explanatory paradigm, or
ideological encoding) to condition any notion of history as objective presentation of past events, rather than as interpretive representation of those past events, which are given meaning (as historical facts) by the very discourse of the historian. What is foregrounded in postmodern theory and practice is the self-conscious inscription within history of the existing, but usually concealed, attitude of historians toward their material. Provisionality and undecidability, partisanship and even overt politics – these are what replace the pose of objectivity and disinterestedness that denies the interpretive and implicitly evaluative nature of historical representation.

The question of objectivity in historiography is not just one of methodology. As discussed in the last chapter, it is also related to what Jameson calls the ‘crisis of representation’ of our culture, ‘in which an essentially realist epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it – projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself’ (Jameson 1984b: viii). The epistemological issues raised by representation in both historiography and fiction belong in the context of this crisis. The work of Hayden White has clearly been important in bringing these issues into the forefront of historical and literary critical discussions. He has asked the same kind of questions that novels like Berger’s G. or Boyd’s The New Confessions have asked:

What is the structure of a peculiarly historical consciousness? What is the epistemological status of historical explanations as compared with other kinds of explanations that might be offered to account for the materials with which historians ordinarily deal? What are the possible forms of historical representation and what are their bases? By what authority can historical accounts claim to be contributions to a secured knowledge of reality in general and to the human sciences in particular?

(White 1978a: 41)

The issue of representation and its epistemological claims leads directly to the problem introduced in the last chapter regarding the nature
and status of the ‘fact’ in both history-writing and fiction-writing. All past ‘events’ are potential historical ‘facts,’ but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated. We have seen that this distinction between brute event and meaning-granted fact is one with which postmodern fiction seems obsessed. At a certain moment in his relating of the contemporary history of India and Pakistan in *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem Sinai addresses his reader: ‘I am trying hard to stop being mystifying. Important to concentrate on good hard facts. But which facts?’ (Rushdie 1981: 338). This is a serious problem because at one point he cannot tell, from ‘accurate’ accounts in documents (newspapers), whether Pakistani troops really did enter Kashmir or not. The ‘Voice of Pakistan’ and ‘All-India Radio’ give totally opposing reports. And if they did (or did not) enter, what were the motives? ‘Again, a rash of possible explanations,’ we are told (339). Saleem parodies the historiographical drive toward causality and motivation through his reductive, megalomaniacal exaggeration: ‘This reason or that or the other? To simplify matters, I present two of my own: the war happened because I dreamed Kashmir into the fantasies of our rulers; furthermore, I remained impure, and the war was to separate me from my sins’ (339).

Such a perspective may be the only possible response left to a world where ‘[n]othing was real; nothing certain’ (Rushdie 1981: 340). Certainly the text’s grammar here alters – from assertive sentences to a long list of interrogatives that ends with what might be the ultimate example of contradictory postmodern discourse: ‘Aircraft, real or fictional, dropped actual or mythical bombs’ (341). Compared to what the sources and documents of history offer him, Saleem himself is ‘only the humblest of jugglers-with-facts’ in a country ‘where truth is what it is instructed to be’ (326). The ideological as well as historiographic implications here are overt. The text’s self-reflexivity points in two directions at once, toward the events being represented in the narrative and toward the act of narration itself. This is precisely the same doubleness that characterizes all historical narrative. Neither form of representation can separate ‘facts’ from the acts of interpretation and narration that constitute them, for facts (though not events) are created in and by those acts. And what actually becomes fact depends as much as anything else on the social and cultural context of the historian, as
feminist theorists have shown with regard to women writers of history over the centuries.

Despite first appearances, the distinction between fact and event is actually quite different from that other opposition which is central to the criticism of the novel genre: that of fiction versus non-fiction. But because postmodern novels focus on the process of event becoming fact, they draw attention to the dubiousness of the positivist, empiricist hierarchy implied in the binary opposing of the real to the fictive, and they do so by suggesting that the non-fictional is as constructed and as narratively known as is fiction. For some critics, all novels are ambivalent in their attitude toward the separation of fact and fiction, but some historiographic metafiction do seem more overtly and problematically so. In his Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel (1983), Lennard Davis argues convincingly for the coterminous discursive identity of fact and fiction in the mid-eighteenth-century novel of Defoe and others. But in the postmodern rewriting of Robinson Crusoe in J.M. Coetzee’s Foe, it is necessary that we separate what we know of the history of the writing of Defoe’s novel (its sources, its intertexts) from what Coetzee offers as the (fictionally) real – but absented and silenced – female origin of the story: the experience of castaway Susan Barton. This may not be ‘true’ of Defoe’s particular story, but it does have something to say about the position of women and the politics of representation in both the fiction and the nonfiction of the eighteenth century.

When historiographic metafiction use the verifiable events and personages of history, like Defoe or Indira Gandhi, they are open to being attacked for inaccuracies, lying, slander, or simply bad taste. Fuentes’s Terra Nőstra deliberately and provocatively violates what is conventionally accepted as true about the events of the past: Elizabeth I gets married; Columbus is a century or so out in his discovery of America. But the facts of this warped history are no more – or less – fictionally constructed than are the overtly fictive and intertextual ones: characters from different Spanish-American novels all come together in one scene, with apt echoes of At Swim-Two-Birds, Mulligan Stew, and other experimental fiction. The realist notion of characters only being able to coexist legitimately if they belong to the same text is clearly challenged here in both historical and fictional terms. The facts of these fictional
representations are as true – and false – as the facts of history-writing can be, for they always exist as facts, not events. In the representations of Coover’s Nixon in The Public Burning and Bowering’s George Vancouver in Burning Water this interpretive process is made overt.

It is interesting that, in his influential discussion of the historical novel, Georg Lukács did not demand correctness of individual facts as a condition of defining the historical faithfulness of situation. Historical data traditionally enter nineteenth-century historical fiction in order to reinforce the text’s claim to verifiability or at least to a persuasive rendering into fact of its events. Of course, all realist fiction has always used historical events, duly transformed into facts, in order to grant to its fictive universe a sense of circumstantiality and specificity of detail, as well as verifiability. What postmodern fiction does is make overt the fact-making and meaning-granting processes. The narrator of Rushdie’s Shame announces:

The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space. My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan.

(Rushdie 1983: 29)

The open mixing of the fictive with the historical in the narrator’s story-telling is made into part of the very narrative:

In Delhi, in the days before partition, the authorities rounded up any Muslims . . . and locked them up in the red fortress . . . including members of my own family. It’s easy to imagine that as my relatives moved through the Red Fort in the parallel universe of history, they might have felt some hint of the fictional presence of Bilquis Kemal.

(Rushdie 1983: 64)

A few pages later, however, we are reminded: ‘If this were a realistic novel about Pakistan, I would not be writing about Bilquis and the wind; I would be talking about my youngest sister’ (68) – about whom he then does indeed talk. The seeming non sequitur here points both to
the arbitrariness of the process of deciding which events become facts and to the relationship between realist fiction and the writing of history. Although the narrator writes from England, he chooses to write about Pakistan, acknowledging that ‘I am forced to reflect that world in fragments of broken mirrors. . . . I must reconcile myself to the inevitability of the missing bits’ (69) – a warning meant for the reader of both fiction and history.

Historiographic metafiction like this is self-conscious about the paradox of the totalizing yet inevitably partial act of narrative representation. It overtly ‘de-doxifies’ received notions about the process of representing the actual in narrative – be it fictional or historical. It traces the processing of events into facts, exploiting and then undermining the conventions of both novelistic realism and historiographic reference. It implies that, like fiction, history constructs its object, that events named become facts and thus both do and do not retain their status outside language. This is the paradox of postmodernism. The past really did exist, but we can only know it today through its textual traces, its often complex and indirect representations in the present: documents, archives, but also photographs, paintings, architecture, films, and literature.

THE ARCHIVE AS TEXT

When critics write of the ‘prior textualization’ of history or suggest that events are really just abstractions from narratives, they directly echo the insights of historiographic metafiction. In theoretical debates, what has been emphasized is the specifically textual nature of the archival traces of those events, traces by which we infer meaning and grant factual status to those empirical data. We only know, for instance, that wars existed by the accounts of them in the documents and eyewitness reports of the time. And the point is, these archival traces are by no means unproblematic in their different possible interpretations. Historiographic metafiction’s self-conscious thematizing of the processes of fact-producing also foregrounds this hermeneutic problem. In Christa Wolf’s Cassandra, we are asked to imagine that the usually accepted ‘fact’ of Paris’s abduction of Helen to Troy might actually have been a fiction created by the Trojan council and the priests. If so, in
Cassandra’s words: ‘I saw how a news report was manufactured, hard, forged, polished like a spear’ (Wolf 1984: 64). She watched as ‘people ran through the streets cheering. I saw a news item turn into the truth’ (65). What Wolf offers is the hypothesis that the war thought to have been fought over Helen was really fought over lying pride: Helen was, in fact, taken from Paris by the King of Egypt and never reached Troy. And, of course, according to the history books, if not Homer’s epic, as she reminds us, the war was officially fought over sea trade routes. This is the postmodern problematizing of interpretive, selective fact in relation to actual event.

What novels such as this focus on are the discrepancies between the res gestae and the historia rerum gestarum. Needless to say, this has also become one of the fundamental issues of historiographic theory. Even an eye-witness account can only offer one limited interpretation of what happened; another could be different, because of many things, including background knowledge, circumstances, angle of vision, or what is at stake for that witness. Nevertheless, as Frank Kermode reminds us,

> although we are aware that a particular view of the world, about what must or ought to happen, affects accounts of what does or did happen, we tend to repress this knowledge in writing and reading history, and allow it free play only when firmly situated in the differently privileged ground of fiction.

(Kermode 1979: 109)

Historiographic metafiction, however, also shakes up that privileged ground. The narrator of Gabriel García Márquez’s Chronicle of a Death Foretold attempts to reconstruct a murder twenty-seven years after the event, from both his own memories and those of eye-witnesses. But, by the second page of the book, we are made aware of the radical unreliability of both sources: ‘Many people coincided in recalling that it was a radiant morning . . . But most agreed that the weather was funereal, with a cloudy, low sky’ (García Márquez 1982: 2). He turns to the investigating judge’s 500-page report of the crime, of which (significantly) he can only recover 322 pages. Again the documentary evidence turns out to be partial – in both senses of the word, for the
judge, it seems, was ‘a man burning with the fever of literature’ (116) not history.

Texts like this suggest that among the issues about representation that have been subjected to ‘de-doxification’ are the concepts of truth of correspondence (to reality) and its relation to truth of coherence (within the narrative) (White 1976: 22). What is the relationship between the documentary and the formalizing impulses in historiographic representation? The source of this problematizing in postmodern fiction seems to lie in the textual nature of the archival traces of events which are then made into facts. Because those traces are already textualized, they can be ‘buried, exhumed, deposed, contradicted, recanted’ (Doctorow 1983: 23); they can be and indeed are inevitably interpreted. The same questioning of the status of the document and its interpretation that is being conducted in historiography can be found in postmodern novels like Berger’s G. or Barnes’s Flaubert’s Parrot, or D.M. Thomas’s The White Hotel. This sort of fiction has contributed to the now quite general reconsideration of the nature of documentary evidence. If the archive is composed of texts, it is open to all kinds of use and abuse. The archive has always been the site of a lot of activity, but rarely of such self-consciously totalizing activity as it is today. Even what is considered acceptable as documentary evidence has changed. And certainly the status of the document has altered: since it is acknowledged that it can offer no direct access to the past, then it must be a representation or a replacement through textual refiguring of the brute event.

In postmodern fiction, there is a contradictory turning to the archive and yet a contesting of its authority. In Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men, documents are shown to be extremely unstable sources of identity: American citizenship papers, visas, and passports are all bought and sold with ease. The historical archive may verify the existence of Harry Houdini, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Emma Goldman, Stanford White, J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and other characters in Doctorow’s Ragtime, but it remains stubbornly silent about the ride Freud and Jung are made to take through the Coney Island tunnel of love, though that fictive incident might be argued to be historically accurate as a metaphor of the two men’s relationship. Is Doctorow’s interpretation of the Rosenbergs’ trial in The Book of Daniel somehow trivialized because he
changes their name to Isaacson and makes their two sons into a son and
dughter, and their incriminating witness not a family member, but a
friend? Doctorow has not tried to solve the question of their historical
innocence or guilt. What he has done, through his character
Daniel’s process of searching, is to investigate how we might begin to
interrogate the documents in order to interpret them one way or the
other.

If the past is only known to us today through its textualized traces
(which, like all texts, are always open to interpretation), then the writ-
ing of both history and historiographic metafiction becomes a form of
complex intertextual cross-referencing that operates within (and does
not deny) its unavoidably discursive context. There can be little doubt
of the impact of poststructuralist theories of textuality on this kind of
writing, for this is writing that raises basic questions about the possi-
bilities and limits of meaning in the representation of the past. The
focus on textuality, in LaCapra’s words, ‘serves to render less dogmatic
the concept of reality by pointing to the fact that one is “always
already” implicated in problems of language use’ (1983: 26) and
discourse.

To say that the past is only known to us through textual traces is not,
however, the same as saying that the past is only textual, as the semiotic
idealism of some forms of poststructuralism seems to assert. This onto-
logical reduction is not the point of postmodernism: past events
existed empirically, but in epistemological terms we can only know
them today through texts. Past events are given meaning, not existence, by
their representation in history. This is quite the opposite of Baudril-
lard’s claim that they are reduced to simulacra; instead, they are made
to signify. History’s meaning lies not in ‘what hurts’ so much as in
‘what we say once hurt’ – for we are both irremediably distanced by
time and yet determined to grant meaning to that real pain of others
(and ourselves).

What postmodern novels like Fowles’s A Maggot or Findley’s Famous
Last Words do is to focus in a very self-reflexive way on the processes of
both the production and the reception of paradoxically fictive histor-
ical writing. They raise the issue of how the intertexts of history,
its documents or its traces, get incorporated into such an avowedly
fictional context, while somehow also retaining their historical
documentary value. The actual physical means of this particular incorporating representation are often, perhaps not surprisingly, those of history-writing, especially its ‘paratextual’ conventions: in particular, its footnotes and illustrations, but also its subtitles, prefaces, epilogues, epigraphs, and so on. The kind of paratextual practice found in postmodern fiction is not unique to it, of course. Think of the documentary function of newspaper accounts in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, for instance. Or we might also recall the use of history in the nonfictional novel, such as Norman Mailer’s *Of a Fire on the Moon*. I mention this particular work only because, in it, Mailer made a factual error in describing the moon-landing lights on the Eagle. Though immediately corrected by a more knowledgeable reader, he never made the change textually, except to add a footnote in the paperback edition. He seems to have wanted to retain the dichotomy of its imaginative, if erroneous, fictionalizing and of the corrective paratext, as well, in order to signal to the reader the dual status of his representation of the Apollo mission: the events actually happened, but the facts that we read are those constituted by his narrativized account of them.

Similarly, the forewords and afterwords that frame many other nonfictional novels remind us that these works, despite their rooting in documentary reality, are still created forms, with a particular perspective that transforms. In these texts, the documentary is shown to be inevitably touched by the fictive, the shaped, the invented. In historiographic metafiction, however, this relationship is often more complex. In John Fowles’s self-reflexively ‘eighteenth-century’ novel, *A Maggot*, the epilogue functions in two ways. On the one hand, it asserts the fictionalizing of a historical event that has gone on: the actual historical personages who appear in the novel are said to be ‘almost all invention beyond their names.’ But the epilogue also roots the fiction firmly in historical – and ideological – actuality: both that of the origins of the historical Shakers and that of the present metaphorical ‘faith’ of the writing narrator himself. In a statement which echoes the tone and sentiments of the fictive voice of Fowles’s earlier (self-reflexively ‘nineteenth-century’) novel, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the contextualizing epilogist asserts: ‘In much else we have developed immeasurably from the eighteenth century; with their central plain question – what morality justifies the flagrant injustice and inequality of human
society? – we have not progressed one inch’ (Fowles 1985: 454). Instead of the neat closure of the eighteenth-century narrative which he inscribes and then subverts, Fowles offers us an ending which is labelled as an ‘epilogue’ (that is, external to the narrative), but which (unlike the pre-textual ‘prologue’) is not signed ‘John Fowles.’ Whose voice addresses us, then, at the very end? Our inability to reply with any certainty points, not to any neatly completed plot structure, but to how it is we, as writers and readers, desire and make closure.

Whatever the degree of complexity of the paratextuality, its presence is hard to ignore in this kind of postmodern writing. William Gass has pointed out that, from the first, the novel has been a ‘fact-infested form’ (Gass 1985: 86), and for him the novelistic battle for ‘reality’ has always been fought between ‘data and design’ (95). Therefore, the postmodern self-conscious use of paratexts to represent historical data within narrative design might well be regarded as a highly artificial and un-organic mode of doing what novels have always done. And this would certainly be true. But perhaps it is deliberately awkward, as a means of directing our attention to the very processes by which we understand and interpret the past through its textual representations – be it in history or in fiction.

History-writing’s paratexts (especially footnotes and the textual incorporation of written documents) are conventions which historiographic metafiction both uses and abuses, perhaps parodically exacting revenge for some historians’ tendency to read literature only as historical document. Although, as we have seen, the validity of the entire concept of objective and unproblematic documentation in the writing of history has been called into question, even today paratextuality remains the central mode of textually certifying historical events, and the footnote is still the main textual form by which this believability is procured. Although publishers hate footnotes (they are expensive and they disrupt the reader’s attention), such paratexts have always been central to historiographic practice, to the writing of the doubled narrative of the past in the present.

Historiographic metafiction is, in a number of senses, even more overtly another example of doubled narrative, and even a brief look at the functions of footnotes in a novel like Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman shows the role paratextuality can play in the insertion of
historical texts into metafiction. Here the specificity of Victorian social and literary history is evoked (in tandem with both the fictional narrative and the metafictional commentary) through footnotes which explain details of Victorian sexual habits, vocabulary, politics, or social practices. Sometimes a note is used to offer a translation for modern readers, who just might not be able to translate Latin quite as easily as their Victorian forebears could. This is in clear (and ironic) contrast to Laurence Sterne’s assumption in Tristram Shandy that readers and commentators shared a certain educational background. Obviously, part of the function of these postmodern notes is extra-textual, referring us to a world outside the novel, but there is something else going on too: most of the notes refer us explicitly to other texts, other representations first, and to the external world only indirectly through them.

A second function of paratextuality, then, would be primarily a discursive one. The reader’s linear reading is disrupted by the presence of a lower text on the same page, and this hermeneutic disruption calls attention to the footnote’s own very doubled or dialogic form. In historical discourse, we know that footnotes are often the space where opposing views are dealt with (and textually marginalized), but we also know that they can offer a supplement to the upper text or can often provide an authority to support it. In historiographic metafiction these footnoting conventions are both inscribed and parodically inverted. They do indeed function here as self-reflexive signals to assure the reader as to the historical credibility of the particular witness or authority cited, while at the same time they also disrupt our reading – that is, our creating – of a coherent, totalizing fictive narrative. In other words, these notes operate centrifugally as well as centripetally. The roots of this kind of paradoxical practice predate postmodernism, of course. Think of the notes in Finnegans Wake.

The metafictional self-reflexivity induced by the postmodern footnote’s paradox of represented yet resisted authority is made evident in novels such as Alasdair Gray’s parodic Lanark, where the text incorporates self-commenting footnotes, which themselves also refer to a set of marginal notations (an ‘Index of Plagiarisms,’ in fact), which is in turn a parodic play on the marginal glosses of earlier literature, such as the same Finnegans Wake or ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.’ Chinese-box-structured metafiction like this frequently upsets (and therefore
foregrounds) the normal or conventional balance of the primary text and the traditionally secondary paratextual notes or commentary. Sometimes, too, the notes will even engulf the text, as in Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. In these particular overpowering footnotes, the irony of the seemingly authoritative documenting of psychoanalytic explanatory authorities is that they frequently do not at all explain the characters’ behavior – either sexual or political. The conventionally presumed authority of the footnote form and content is rendered questionable, if not totally undermined. A similar paratextual de-naturalizing of the questions of precedence, origin, and authority can also be seen in those other, much discussed, paratextual classics: Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and Derrida’s *Glas*.

A related, doubled use-and-abuse of conventional expectation accompanies other forms of metafictional paratextuality, such as chapter headings and epigraphs. As with footnotes, forewords, and epilogues, these devices in historiographic metafiction move in two directions at once: to remind us of the narrativity (and fictionality) of the primary text and to assert its factuality and historicity. In novels like John Barth’s *LETTERS* the deliberately excessive kind of descriptive chapter headings points to the fictiveness and the organizational patterning that belie the realist representation conventionally suggested by the use of the epistolary form. On the other hand, there are novels, such as Audrey Thomas’s *Intertidal Life* and Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* once again, which use epigraphs to direct the reader to a specific, real historical context within (or against) which the fictive universe operates, however problematically. These paratexts prevent any tendency on the part of the reader to universalize and eternalize – that is, to dehistoricize. In Fowles’s novel, the historical particularity of both the Victorian and the contemporary is asserted. This is yet another way in which postmodern literature works to contest (from within) any totalizing narrative impulse. Recalling Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern condition as that which is characterized by an active distrust of the master narratives that we have used to make sense of our world, the aggressive assertion of the historical and the social particularity of the fictive worlds of these novels ends up calling attention, not to what fits the master narrative, but instead, to the ex-centric, the marginal, the borderline – all those things
that threaten the (illusory but comforting) security of the centered, totalizing, masterly discourses of our culture.

Whatever the paratextual form — footnote, epigraph, title — the function is to make space for the intertexts of history within the texts of fiction. To the historian, though, such ‘intertexts’ are usually thought of in quite different terms: as documentary evidence. But, as we have seen, historians have increasingly had to face challenges to their traditional trust in documentary authenticity as the repository of truth, as what allows them to reconstitute brute experiential events into historical facts in an unproblematic way. There has always been an implicit or explicit hierarchy among documentary sources for historians: the farther we get from the actual event, the less trustworthy is the document. But whether historians deal with seemingly direct informational reports and registers or with eye-witness accounts, the problem is that historians deal with representations, with texts, which they then process. The denial of this act of processing can lead to a kind of fetishizing of the archive, making it into a substitute for the past. In postmodern novels like Chris Scott’s Antichthon or Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, the stress is on the act of de-naturalizing documents in both historical and fictional writing. The document can no longer pretend to be a transparent means to a past event; it is instead the textually transformed trace of that past. D.M. Thomas used the text of Dina Pronicheva’s eye-witness account of Babi Yar in his The White Hotel, but this account was already doubly distanced from the historical event: it was her later recounting of her experience, as told by Anatoli Kuznetsov in his book, Babi Yar. Historians never seize the event directly and entirely, only incompletely and laterally — through documents, that is, through texts like this. History does not so much say what the past was; rather, it says what it is still possible to know — and thus represent — of it.

Historians are readers of fragmentary documents and, like readers of fiction, they fill in the gaps and create ordering structures which may be further disrupted by new textual inconsistencies that will force the formation of new totalizing patterns. In Lionel Gossman’s terms: ‘The historian’s narrative is constructed not upon reality itself or upon transparent images of it, but on signifiers which the historian’s own action transforms into signs. It is not historical reality itself but the present signs of the historian that limit and order the historical
narrative’ (Gossman 1978: 32). And Gossman points to paratextuality as the very sign of this ontological split: ‘The division of the historiographical page [by footnotes] is a testimony to the discontinuity between past “reality” and the historical narrative’ (32). But even that past ‘reality’ is a textualized one – at least, for us today. What historiographic metafiction suggests is a recognition of a central responsibility of the historian and the novelist alike: their responsibility as makers of meaning through representation.

Postmodern texts consistently use and abuse actual historical documents and documentation in such a way as to stress both the discursive nature of those representations of the past and the narrativized form in which we read them. In Cortázar’s Libro de Manuel, suggestively translated as A Manual for Manuel, the physical intrusion of newspaper clippings in the text that we read constitutes a formal and hermeneutic disruption. Their typographical reproduction (in a typeface different from that of the text’s body) asserts their paratextual, authenticating role. They act as a kind of collage, but only ironically, because what they incorporate is not any actual fragment of the real referent, but – once again – its textualized representation. It has been argued that the collage form is one that remains representational while still breaking with realism through its fragmentation and discontinuity. Cortázar’s paratextual use of a collage of newsclippings inserted into the fictional text points not only to the actual social and political background of the novel’s action, but also to the fact that our knowledge of that background is always already a discursive one: we know past (and present?) reality mostly through texts that recount it through representations, just as we pass on our historical knowledge through other representations. The book is (as its title suggests) a manual for the revolutionaries’ child, Manuel. Newspapers and magazines are the recording texts and the representations of contemporary history. In Coover’s The Public Burning, Time magazine and the New York Times are revealed as the documents – or docu-fictions – of twentieth-century America, the very creators and manipulators of ideology.

Another function of the paratextual insertion of actual historical documents into historiographic metafictions can be related to Brecht’s alienation effect: like the songs in his plays, the historical documents dropped into the fictions have the potential effect of interrupting any
illusion, of making the reader into an aware collaborator, not a passive consumer. The potential for Brechtian ideological challenge is perhaps present in those modes of art that incorporate history’s texts very self-consciously and materially. In Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men the documents of American law regarding Chinese citizens as immigrants are juxtaposed with the fictionalized narrative of the actual realities of the American treatment of Chinese railway workers. One chapter begins with the representation of this document:

The United States of America and the Emperor of China cordially recognize the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance, and also the mutual advantage of the free migration and emigration of their citizens and subjects respectively from the one country to the other for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or as permanent residents. ARTICLE V OF THE BURLINGAME TREATY, SIGNED IN WASHINGTON, D.C., JULY 28, 1868, AND IN PEKING, NOVEMBER 23, 1869.

(Kingston 1980: 150)

By 1878, however, only Chinese fishermen in California were being required to pay fishing taxes; by 1882, the first Chinese Exclusion Act had been passed, preventing immigration for ten years; and by 1893, the Supreme Court of the United States had decreed that Congress had ‘the right to expel members of a race who “continued to be aliens, having taken no steps toward becoming citizens, and incapable of becoming such under the naturalization laws”’ (153, emphasis mine). The Supreme Court seemed unaware of the heavy irony of the ‘Catch-22’ of Chinese immigrants not becoming citizens when, in fact, prevented from doing so by law. The ideological impact here is a strong one.

It is worth noting, however, that in fiction like this, despite the metafictional self-reflexivity, the general apparatus of novelistic realism is in a sense retained. For example, the reproduction of pages from the Gentleman’s Magazine for 1736 in A Maggot does offer other — external, but still textualized — contexts for the fiction. These documents do have a self-verifying place in the narrative, but this is always a paradoxical place: there is both the assertion of external reference and the contradictory reminder that we only know that external world through other
texts. This postmodern use of paratextuality as a formal mode of overt intertextuality both works within and subverts that apparatus of realism still typical of the novel genre, even in its more metafictional forms. Parodic play with what we might call the trappings of realist representation has increased lately, perhaps because of the new trappings that technology has offered us. The popular device of the tape recorder, for instance, has brought us the ‘talked book’ (taped interviews, transcribed and edited) and the nonfictional novel based on tape-recorded ‘documents’ which may appear to filter out the narrator and allow some direct access to actuality – though only if we ignore the distorting effect that the taping process itself can have upon speakers. Metafictional parody of this pretence of objectivity sometimes takes the form of an intense textual awareness of the process of oral recording (as in Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* or Jack Hodgins’s *The Invention of the World*).

In one sense, however, what such postmodern parody points to is the acknowledgement that these are only technological updatings of those earlier trappings of realism: the written, clerical transcriptions of oral statements. These are metafictionally ironized in *A Maggot*, with an air of authenticity but with more avowed room for error (or fictionalizing gap-filling). The clerk who takes down in shorthand the testimonies of witnesses being interrogated admits: ‘where I cannot read when I copy in the long hand, why, I make it up. So I may hang a man, or pardon him, and none the wiser’ (Fowles 1985: 343). Historiographic metafiction also uses some of the newer trappings, however, in order to mimic an electronically reproduced oral culture, while always aware that the reader only has access to that orality in written form. As novelist Ronald Sukenick puts it: ‘Fiction, finally, involves print on a page, and that is not an incidental convenience of production and distribution, but an essential of the medium’ (1985: 46).

While the oral tradition has traditionally been directly connected with the cultural handing down of the past and of our knowledge of the past, its particular role in postmodern fiction is tied up with that of the trappings of realism upon which paratextuality relies. The desire for self-authenticating oral presence is matched by a need for permanence through writing. In *The Temptations of Big Bear*, Rudy Wiebe has attempted, in a very self-reflexive manner, to capture in print and in fiction a historical character whose essence was his voice. He also had
to convey the rhetorical and ritualistic power of oral Indian speech in written English. This attempt to present the historical fact of Big Bear’s oral presence was further complicated for Wiebe by the lack of records (much less recordings) of the great Cree orator’s speeches. But the novel’s textual self-consciousness about this oral/written dichotomy points to the text’s triple ironic realization: that Big Bear’s dynamic oral presence in the past can be conveyed to us today only in static print; that the oratorical power that went beyond words can be expressed only in words; and that, maybe, the truth of historical fact can be represented most powerfully today in self-consciously novelistic fiction.

Illustrations, especially photographs, function in much the same manner as other paratexts in relation to the apparatus of novelistic realism. That this is especially true in historiographic metafiction should not be surprising. As we have seen, the photograph presents both the past as presence and the present as inescapably historical. All photographs are by definition representations of the past. In Coming Through Slaughter, Michael Ondaatje paratextually reproduces the one known photograph of the early jazz musician, Buddy Bolden, the one taken by E. J. Bellocq. In this biographical metafiction, Bellocq’s presence in the narrative and the narrator’s own entrance as photographer (as well as writer) are used to juxtapose the fluid, dynamic, but unrecorded music of the mad, and finally silent, Bolden with the static, reductive, but enduring recording on paper – by both photography and biography. But both forms of recording or representing in a way mark only the absence of the recorded. Both do record yet in a very real sense they also falsify the real they represent. This is the paradox of the postmodern.

In Camera Lucida Roland Barthes offers another way of looking at photography and history, one that might seem to explain even better the paratextual attraction to photos within postmodern fiction. Photographs are said to carry their referent within themselves: there is a necessarily real thing which was once placed before the lens and which, while happening only once, can be repeated on paper. As Barthes says, ‘the thing has been there’ (1981: 76) in the past. The photo ratifies what was there, what it represents, and does so in a way that language can never do. It is not odd that the historiographic metafictionist, grappling with the same issue of representation of the past,
might want to turn, for analogies and inspiration, to this other medium, this ‘certificate of presence’ (87), this paradoxically undermining yet authentifying representation of the past real. As we have already seen, it was Walter Benjamin’s insight that photography also subverts romantic uniqueness and authorial authenticity, and it is this subversion that postmodern fiction foregrounds too in the constant contradiction at the heart of its use of photographic paratextual representation: photos are still presences of absences. They both verify the past and void it of its historicity. Like writing, photography is as much transformation as recording; representation is always alteration, be it in language or in images, and it always has its politics.

Postmodern paratextual insertions of these different kinds of historical traces of events, what historians call documents – be they newspaper clippings, legal statements, or photographic illustrations – de-naturalize the archive, foregrounding above all the textuality of its representations. These documentary texts appear in footnotes, epigraphs, prefaces, and epilogues; sometimes they are parachuted directly into the fictive discourse, as if in a collage. What they all do, however, is pose once again that important postmodern question: how exactly is it that we come to know the past? In these novels, we literally see the paratextual traces of history, the discourses or texts of the past, its documents and its narrativized representations. But the final result of all this self-consciousness is not to offer us any answers to that question, but only to suggest even more problematizing queries. How can historiography (much less fiction) begin to deal with what Coover’s Uncle Sam calls ‘the fatal slantindicular futility of Fact?’