

## CHAPTER 1

### *Reading History / Resisting History*

Children daydream. They make up stories about themselves in which they perform heroic deeds, earn admiration, receive love. Sigmund Freud divided these daydreams into two categories: the plots of ambition dreamed by young men, and the plots of romance dreamed by young women. The dichotomy is, of course, oversimple; what interests me the most about daydreams is that whether ambitious or romantic, daydreams derive from preexisting stories, often from history. Scraps of information about the past or present provide a bridge between fantasy and reality. When, in childhood, I imagined myself Annie Oakley, fearlessly facing the Wild West, or Francis Marion, outwitting the British during the Revolutionary War, the historical referents were a crucial way of making the dream real: what I used of actual history seemed to lend actuality to my own heroism.

Such daydreams become part of who a person is; how a child borrows from and shapes historical plots not only results from, but also shapes, her sense of self. History provides a repertoire of stories which collectively define the kinds of lives people live. Reading and responding to history is one of the ways in which young women figure out who they can be. History also often offers them their first exposure to the relation of gender to power, as these young readers notice that most of history's high achievers were male, as were most of its interpreters. Ambitious young girls, who yearn for power as much as love, may well identify with these heroes of history, the Great Men. Willa Cather, for example, admired Alexander the Great (O'Brien 82); Bryher, a historical novelist and H. D.'s lifelong companion, identified with Hannibal (*Coin* ix), and Radclyffe Hall's autobiographical Stephen Gordon imagined herself Admiral Nelson (Hall 13). One need not study history extensively to recognize the link it reveals between men and power. As Sharon O'Brien writes of Willa Cather, "to assume a powerful identity . . .—the female child must imagine herself as male" (26).

There is, however, a certain tension for young girls in identifying with a male figure, the tension of identifying with a male while knowing oneself categorized as female. Naomi Mitchison writes that reading Plato's *Republic*, she dreamed of becoming a Guardian, "But in my inside stories

I don't suppose I was ever a Greek woman" (*All* 40). And Bryher writes, in her autobiographical *Two Selves*, of the split between her obedient female self and her other identity, as "a boy, a brain, that planned adventure and sought wisdom" (5). Both Mary Renault and Naomi Mitchison write of feeling themselves "honorary boys," and Bryher writes of her "boy's heart" (*Development* 162).

The way in which historical discourse inscribed these interlocking issues of power, gender, and narrative authority provided a powerful motivation, between World Wars I and II, for women to write historical fiction. Born in the 1890s, reaching maturity during and after World War I, Naomi Mitchison, Mary Butts, Bryher (born Annie Winifred Ellerman), and Phyllis Bentley experienced childhood under the rule of Queen Victoria, then witnessed the feminist activism that immediately preceded World War I, the return to domesticity that followed it, and the political turmoil of the 1930s. All four women were raised emphatically as "girls"—to please, to serve, to look nice, to stay out of danger—and all felt themselves capable of more. Laura Riding (born Laura Reichenthal in the United States in 1901), and Mary Renault (born Mary Challans in 1905) escaped Queen Victoria, but dealt with similar pressures. Most of these six women read history, dreamed themselves grandiose dreams, then felt thwarted. Most struggled to get the education that would allow them to read Greek and Latin, finding their gender made that education more difficult. All grew up to write historical novels set in the ancient world.

In writing historical fiction about Greece and Rome, Mitchison, Butts, Bryher, Bentley, Riding, and Renault were working through the interrelationship of their gender, their desires, the possible roles with which reading history presented them, and the narrative power that the writing of history offered them. By *working through*, I mean that having read, they then, in their writing, synthesized, juxtaposed, and recapitulated their sources in such a way as to suggest the existence of a culturally repressed female past, a past both they and the culture as a whole needed to recognize as their own. Freud writes that resistance to unacceptable memories causes the patient to repeat the past rather than remember it (12: 150). In a therapeutic situation, the result of resistance and repetition is the "transference of the forgotten past not only on to the doctor, but also on to all the other aspects of the current situation" (12: 151). This transference can then serve to motivate remembering, though the patient, Freud insists, needs time to "become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted"; this is the process of "working through" (12: 155).

*Transference*, as well as *working through*, is a useful term here in analyzing the interrelationship among these writers, their sources, and

their novels. Dominick LaCapra has suggested that “transference” can also be detected in the “relation of the historian to the ‘object’ of study”:

Transference in this somewhat more indirect and attenuated sense refers to the manner in which the problems at issue in the object of study reappear (or are repeated with variations) in the work of the historian. (*Soundings* 37)

The process I see operating in these women’s historical fiction is similar. For each writer, there is a complex interaction among the events and issues offered by ancient Greece and Rome, the novelist’s experiences, and, most important, the novelist’s own cultural discourses—out of which she constructs her sense of herself and the past.

In LaCapra’s notion of *transference* I find a useful way of conceptualizing the intersection of the individual writer with cultural and historical discourses. My goal has been to combine the insights of psychoanalytic feminism and cultural criticism so as to explore the role of gender in these women’s lives and work without decontextualizing either them or it.<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler argues that gender is not itself substantive but a “relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (10). My six subjects, while diverse in terms of sexual orientation and ethnicity, share race, cultural context, and historical moment: I have tried to emphasize the patterns formed by the role of gender in their work without overlooking their differences. But I have taken it for granted that Western culture is and has long been patriarchal and that among the discourses supporting patriarchy—however multiple and self-contesting it may also be—is history. The anonymous graffiti artist who asked at a women’s history conference, “How come, if Clio’s a woman, she’s not on our side?” has not been alone in her observation (Gardiner, “Biography” 49).

My task, then, has been to examine these women’s negotiations among the various texts defining them: the books they read that told them who they were. These books were often historical, read in preparation for their own historical fiction, but fiction, psychology, and anthropology also obviously influenced them. Their minds filled with other people’s notions of women’s identity and women’s past, these writers wrote their versions of the ancient world. The books that emerged reflected their reading, their resistance, and their working through: their repetition of received versions, their hints of alternative versions, and above all the recurrence of gender and sexuality as issues linked to power. These writers thus *gender* classicism, exposing apparently gender-neutral accounts of the past as stories of male experience. And several—particularly those writing as nonheterosexualists—question the notion of gender itself. “Intelligible” genders, Judith Butler writes, “maintain coherence and continuity

among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (17). By complicating gender as well as foregrounding it, Mitchison, Renault, and Bryher challenge that coherence.

In writing historical fiction, as I've suggested, these women were entering into a dialogue with their culture's sense of the past, a dialogue best understood by looking at how they alter and juxtapose the male-authored texts that often serve as their source material; how, when possible, they integrate the work of female scholars, undermine the authority of traditional scholarship, and walk a narrow line between the pressures of plausibility—which require that they reinforce their readers' assumptions about the past—and subversion.

Given the genre within which these writers were working, the pressure to recreate standard versions of the past—and thus reinscribe women's exclusion—was great indeed. The requirements of the historical novel as a genre would seem to conflict with the exploration of women's roles in history. Twentieth-century French historical novelist Marguerite Yourcenar sums up the problem neatly in *Memoirs of Hadrian*, where she explains why she could not write a historical novel from a female perspective:

Women's lives are much too limited, or else too secret. If a woman does recount her own life she is promptly reproached for being no longer truly feminine. It is already hard enough to give some element of truth to the utterances of a man. (328)

Because women's lives are secret, the data essential to the historical novelist are lacking. Because they are limited, the portrayal of a woman's life is unlikely to capture the broad sweep of historical development essential—such theorists as Georg Lukacs and Avrom Fleishman claim—to the historical novel, and is less liable than a man's to typify a historical period's distinctiveness, at least as codified by traditional history. This process of typification is for Lukacs essential to the historical novel, the aim of which is "to portray the kind of individual destiny that can *directly* and at the same time typically express the problem of an epoch" (284).<sup>2</sup> This synecdochal relationship between characters and era requires central figures who are free to roam, meet people, hold power. Thus Yourcenar comments, referring to two of her historical novels, "it would have been impossible to convey the whole broad panorama of the sixteenth century through the Lady of Froso in her Swedish manor, just as it would have been impossible to convey the ancient world through Plotina" (*With Open Eyes* 226).

Theoreticians of the genre—Alessandro Manzoni, Lukacs, Fleishman, and Harry Shaw—agree that the historical novel's claim to generic identity rests on its treatment of a particular time period different from

the writer's own.<sup>3</sup> Manzoni, for example, defines its purpose as the representation of "the human condition in a historical era through invented actions" (76). Shaw defines the historical novel as a novel in which "historical probability reaches a certain level of structural prominence" (22). Historical probability rests on the "realization that history is comprised of ages and societies that are significantly different from our own" (26). But if the past is, by definition, different, it is available to us primarily as encoded by narrative structures steeped, Hayden White points out, in ideology (*Content* 24). And integral to these narrative structures is historical periodization: the conceptualization of presumably coherent eras in terms of characteristic dress, behavior, social structure, and historical events. Traditional historical periodization, however, is itself based on the exclusion of women's experience, as Joan Kelly-Gadol has shown. Historians have divided up and categorized the past based on their understanding of men's lives alone. Those periods associated with "progress"—Athenian democracy, the Industrial Revolution—tend to be periods in which family life is divided from public life: periods, in other words, in which women's lives are most restricted (810). "Ages and societies that are significantly different from our own," then, are representable only through a system of synecdochal substitution that tends either to marginalize women or absorb them into categories determined by male rather than female status.

Avrom Fleishman articulates the strategy even as he shows how easy it is, employing such a strategy, to forget that women existed at all. "The typical man of an age," he writes, agreeing with and praising Lukacs, "is one whose life is shaped by world-historical figures and other influences in a way that epitomizes the processes of change going forward in the society as a whole" (11). As Fleishman's pervasive use of the term *man* to mean *person* indicates, scholars have tended to define history as precisely those activities—"war, wealth, laws, governments, art, and science"—from which women have been excluded (Kelly-Gadol 12). In the quest for a part that will represent the historical whole, the particularities of female experience are likely to get lost, with a resultant reinscription of women's absence from history.

Besides pressures of plausibility and genre, historical novelists submit to the pressures of reading. Because they are above all readers, historical novelists write out of a tangle of texts: those they have consulted about the past, nonhistorical texts that have shaped their assumptions about human beings, the cultural ideologies they have absorbed—knowingly or unknowingly—since birth. As readers, they are particularly prone to "immasculation," the process Judith Fetterley describes in *The Resisting Reader*: "As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as nor-

mal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny" (26). Patrocinio Schweickart describes the process by which the woman reader, identifying with the male protagonist's viewpoint, becomes alienated from herself:

Androcentric literature is all the more efficient as an instrument of sexual politics because it does not allow the woman reader to seek refuge in her difference. Instead, it draws her into a process that uses her against herself. It solicits her complicity in the elevation of male difference into universality and, accordingly, the denigration of female difference into otherness without reciprocity. (Schweickart 27)

Bound by recorded history and their readers' notions of plausibility, historical novelists are particularly likely to produce novels in which women are marginalized or powerless, novels that reinforce standard assumptions about women and women's role in history, novels that, to use Dominick LaCapra's term, bear a "symptomatic" rather than "transformative" relation to their culture (*History* 5).

But even when reproducing female absence, the historical novels I am examining are never without some "contestatory" element (LaCapra *History* 12). Along with immascultation, the women who wrote these books experienced the social change wrought by late-nineteenth-century feminism and World War I. When forced by physical maturation into an awareness of the female role they were expected to play, they found available to them a range of oppositional stances, including feminism, which allowed them to write as "resistant" as well as acquiescent readers.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it was the very explicitness of women's exclusion from history that made opposition possible. "History," Laura Riding wrote in 1933, "is the most discouraging word I know" (*Four* 68–69). Virginia Woolf's Rachel Vinrace dozes over Gibbon in *The Voyage Out*; Kitty Malone spills ink on her father's manuscript about the history of men at Oxford in *The Pargiters*. All recognize that historical scholarship is not gender-neutral but bent on the exclusion of women. Kitty's father responds to her ink spill in terms of her gender: "You share the inability of your sex, my dear, to grasp the importance of historical facts" (*Pargiters* 93). In doing so, he is echoing Woolf's own father's belief that a "grasp of the facts" was intrinsically "masculine" (Annan 307). Gerda Lerner writes of the "dialectic of women's history" as the "tension between women's actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting that experience" (5); certainly that tension was at its peak in the late nineteenth century.

The tension, combined with the long-sought entry of women into the universities, produced a consciously feminist alternative scholarship. Although Oxford did not grant degrees to women until 1920 and Cam-

bridge not until 1947, women began entering Cambridge and Oxford in the late nineteenth century. As scholars entered fields like anthropology, archeology, medicine, history, and classical literature, they did so intensely aware of the barriers they had faced in getting an education and of the male-dominated scholarship in their disciplines. "I am not sure if the old universities believed that the Almighty had created [women] for the sole use of the male sex," Egyptologist Margaret Murray writes of Oxford and Cambridge, "but they certainly acted as if they did" (*My First* 155).

Women scholars in a wide range of disciplines, bringing a consciously female perspective to their work, took part in what Jane Tompkins calls "cultural work": a "monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view" (83). Eileen Power's 1924 *Medieval People* used documents hitherto overlooked to recreate the daily lives of ordinary people. Paleobotanist Marie Stopes, in her 1918 *Married Love*, analyzed sexual intercourse from a specifically female perspective. Jane Harrison insisted that worship of a Mother Goddess preceded the worship of Zeus. Margaret Murray, Bryher's hieroglyphics teacher, saw European witchcraft as a survival of just such an early, matriarchal, nature-oriented religion.

British women novelists during the 1920s and 1930s were part of this ferment. Woolf eagerly read Power, Harrison, and anthropologist Ruth Benedict. Mary Butts devoured Jane Harrison's work, and Mitchison admired Marie Stopes and Eileen Power. Female scholars became role models; Bryher writes of Jessie Weston that she "became the shining flag of all my rebellions. Besides, she was a woman, and where she had gone, I could follow" (*Heart* 135). Many of these scholars were declared feminists, some were lesbians, and most participated in one way or another in a network of mutual support and inspiration. Bryher, who declared proudly in 1972, "I have always been a feminist if that word means fighting for women's rights, and I glory in it" (*Days* 35), was, during the 1920s and 1930s, part of the literary subculture Shari Benstock describes in *Women of the Left Bank*. She provided financial support to Mary Butts (Hanscombe and Smyers 112), among others, and her Contact Press (established with then-husband Robert McAlmon with her funds) published H. D., Mina Loy, Butts, Djuna Barnes, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, and Gertrude Stein (Hanscombe and Smyers 41). Naomi Mitchison sent a copy of a Laura Riding book to Stevie Smith, and wrote for Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, which published some of Riding's work. Phyllis Bentley was befriended by Winifred Holtby, who wrote a book on Woolf. Mary Butts praised Mitchison's *The Corn King and Spring Queen* as a "book of the greatest importance" ("Story" 210). These women certainly did not all agree with or admire each other, but together they were fertile soil in which a feminist literary culture could take root.

Crucial to this feminist literary culture was the rethinking of history. Woolf herself constantly returned to the reading and writing of history, exploring the transformative impact of including women as its subjects and interpreters. Her "Mistress Joan Martyn," *Orlando*, and *Between the Acts* all suggest that history from a female perspective looks different than from a male one; that it is vital women write this history; and that when they do, not only its subject but its method will differ from male history. "A sudden light upon the legs of Dame Elizabeth Partridge," the historian Rosemund Merridew argues in Woolf's 1906 "Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn," "sends its beams over the whole state of England, to the King upon his throne" (Squier and DeSalvo 241). When women start writing history, Merridew assumes, they will focus on the roles of women, and as a result the entire course of history will look different.

How will it look different?

It will make use, first of all, of metonymy, as Woolf's "sudden light upon the legs of Dame Elizabeth Partridge" suggests. Metaphor, which substitutes one thing for another, implies a unifying vision, while metonymy, based on juxtaposition, suggests an unending chain of associations. Hayden White in *Metahistory* uses this contrast to distinguish between two kinds of historical writing: metaphorical plots create a sense of organic unity; metonymy exposes the role of circumstance, the way history is shaped by chance events, details, and calculations which resist absorption into some overarching intention or meaning. When we look at Dame Elizabeth Partridge's legs, we focus on an overlooked, insignificant detail, metonymical in that it forces us to think in terms of juxtaposition (we follow the light beam from legs to the rest of her, to her surroundings, forcing us to see history as a collection of disparate details). We are also, of course, looking from the bottom up (from legs up to throne), from the female to the male (from Dame to King). Shift the angle of vision away from the powerful, and history as a self-justifyingly organic movement into the future dissolves into an open-ended story that refuses to coalesce.

The German writer Christa Wolf, in her 1981 novel *Cassandra*, offers a feminist methodology for historical fiction that grows quite logically out of Woolf's suggestion. Wolf privileges words over actions, random details over synthesis, anything overlooked or anticlimactic over plot, with its ultimate closure, death. "Use the word to oppose necrophilia," Wolf writes, "to name the inconspicuous, the previous everyday, the concrete" (270). Historical discourse for Wolf *is* necrophilia; it loves death because it loves endings.<sup>5</sup> No matter how sad, the ending always feels good, because it is what the reader has been waiting for. As Hayden White points out, "Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be shown to have had a *plot* all along, they give to



reality the odor of the *ideal*" (*Content* 24). Events that are told as formally satisfying stories take on an aura of inevitability. Given that these stories generally either leave women out of the picture entirely, or include them as silenced objects of exchange or conflict, it is in the interest of women writers to rob them of that "odor of the ideal."

One way they do this is through their emphasis on the "previous everyday," the detail, as a metonymical unraveling of historical synthesis and closure. Naomi Schor has written of the traditional association between women and detail: minutely detailed paintings are seen as "feminine"; abstract or imaginative art is "masculine" (*Reading* 19–20). Unlike the "fragment," which serves synecdochically to represent the whole of which it's a part, the "detail" is tangential, everyday, fictive-sounding (66–69). Everyday details don't serve to represent a historical epoch; they are gratuitous and disruptive, hinting only at an endless chain of additional details that could have been included. In conveying the "previous everyday," historical novelists are thus performing a traditionally feminine task, but they are simultaneously challenging the completeness of any historical plot.

This "feminine" submission to detail suggests Margaret Homans's discussion of the nineteenth-century dichotomy between "male" imagination and "female" realism. The nineteenth-century ideology of womanhood, Homans argues, made it permissible for women writers to be "bearers of the word": transmitters of male knowledge who did no inventing of their own. To a certain extent, they are thus "imitation sons," reinforcing the values associated with that knowledge (20). But they are also women who, precisely because they are women, have not undergone the same process of differentiation from their mothers as men. Combining Lacanian theory with that of feminist Nancy Chodorow, Homans argues that as a result a woman "retains the literal or presymbolic language that the son represses at the time of his renunciation of his mother" (13). Our culture values figuration, Homans argues, because it facilitates flight from the mother, but "women must remain the literal in order to ground the figurative substitutions sons generate and privilege" (9). This puts women in an ambivalent position, inevitably absorbing their culture's devaluing of the literal, but also able to value the literal differently. At particular moments in the text, this differing valuation of the literal may become evident: moments when a metaphor is literalized or women characters or the text itself translate or transmit the language of other authors (30–31). Homans describes the subtle ambivalence that results:

Even though the novel in question always keeps on going in the symbolic order . . . these are moments nonetheless in which there is an implicit contradiction between the novel's continuous representation of female

experience and the text's seeming suddenly to become aware that the implication of such representation is, from the perspective of the symbolic order, the silence and objectification of women. (32–33)

Homans's discussion, despite its nineteenth-century context, illuminates writers like Mitchison, Bentley, and Bryher who, because they are stylistically conventional and respectful of their sources, are themselves "bearers of the word." Not only do they transmit others' knowledge, they often thematize the act of transmission itself by depicting within the plot a struggle for interpretive control. At such moments, these writers' identification with the literal becomes clear.

This notion of "bearing the word" might well be another reason these writers chose historical fiction as their genre. Certainly there was the need to reinterpret the past in gendered terms and a new opportunity to do so now that women could study ancient languages and even get a university education. But for women raised as Victorians, the very modesty of historical fiction as a genre might well have been inviting as well. The gathering of data was a form of submission to authority; its transformation into novel a "bearing" of the word. A glance at the acknowledgment pages of their novels reveals how literal this submission was; Mitchison, in particular, tends to thank the male historian friends who guided her through her research, while all take time to explain their relationship to previously available materials. Both Mitchison and Bentley expressed at various times the tension between their ambition and their fear of hurting their families' feelings; the submission to authority required by historical fiction allowed them to rebel and submit simultaneously.<sup>6</sup>

Both Schor and Homans offer ways of being "feminine" with a vengeance: taking the role assigned them, women play out that role in such a way as to expose the way it operates. Because the writing of historical fiction seems on the surface so submissive an activity, it is an especially appropriate forum for what Irigaray calls "mimicry," the deliberate assumption of a feminine role. This mimicry is the opposite of immasculation, for while immasculation means identifying with the male subject, mimicry aligns the writer with the silence and marginalization of women:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (76)

Laura Riding's *Cressida* and Mary Butts's *Cleopatra* are mimics, in Irigaray's sense. As they play their "feminine" roles, these women are vilified precisely because they are always in excess of the identity assigned them, irreducible to what Irigaray calls the "economy of the Same," which defines all reality in terms of a "masculine subject" (74).

There are other ways as well in which these writers resist the pressures of historical discourse. Even those writers who do seem to identify with the masculine subject—Bryher, for example, with her male adventurers and Renault, with her glamorous depiction of Theseus, conqueror of matriarchy—do so in such a way as to draw attention to their narrative cross-dressing, so that their apparent immasculation becomes an act of transgression against gender boundaries. As lesbians, Renault and Bryher serve as reminders that sexuality as well as gender inflects these women's lives and writing. Both depict male-male relationships of particular intensity; both narrate at times as "male impersonators" (Hugh Kenner's term for Renault); and both depict gender-bending characters who resemble the "mannish lesbian" discussed by Esther Newton, Teresa de Lauretis, and others.<sup>7</sup> Their emphasis on nonheterosexual relationships also subverts the romance plot that so often lends closure to historical novels. When Bulwer-Lytton, Whyte-Melville, or Kingsley, for example, marry off their heroes at novel's end, conflating personal and historical happy endings, they doubly reinforce their readers' sense that how it was, was right. Plots that refuse to privilege heterosexuality are thus undercutting that tendency to read history as romance.

While Riding and Butts are the most radical in their redefinitions of historical fiction, all the writers I discuss here problematize narrative authority and closure, through their use of conflicting sources for and variant perspectives within their novels, and through their emphasis on what has been left out: on silences that resonate beyond the end of the novel and on details that resist absorption into it.

As Celeste Schenck points out in discussing women's epithalamia, generic boundaries often have the effect of excluding women's voices. Confronted with the epithalamion, a genre that "by definition objectifies the feminine," women writers produce variant responses to marriage that necessarily challenge generic definitions (110). The historical novel, too, if less obviously, has been codified in terms that exclude female experience. The pervasive insistence on its historicism, defined by Shaw as "a new awareness of the systematic otherness of society in the past" (26 n), by emphasizing the differentiation of past and present, suggests a past that is completed, objectified, accessible to scholars, unchangeable. By setting their works in the past,<sup>8</sup> in a particular locale, and by simulating period dress and concerns and names, the novelists I discuss announce their acceptance of historical probability as a structuring principle.

But they also work out the problems such a notion poses for them. Just as H. D.'s aim was to "open a place for herself in a tradition that may have seemed closed and completed" (DuPlessis *H. D.*, 19), women historical novelists of this century have sought ways to open up, as well as convey, the past. As they do so, their greatest enemy is the privileging of closure and distance that underlies Shaw's "historical probability" (22) and Lukacs's "historical authenticity" (50). For Lukacs, any experiences that are not historically determined are unsuitable subjects for the historical novel; he mentions sexual abnormality (113) and extremes of feeling (220), but as Shaw points out, much of daily experience is untouched by history (44)—or at least eludes those versions of the past that reach us.

It is precisely this daily experience—Wolf's "previous everyday, the concrete"—that women's historical fiction seeks to evoke. But it cannot do so directly, for there are no data. So for women, resisting the past means reading erasures. Writing the past means making palimpsests: texts that carry traces of that which has been suppressed. The novelists I explore, bound by generic conventions and their sources, preserve much of the patriarchal overwriting—the stories of "politics, events, dates, and great personalities" from which women's passage has been erased (Cantarella 5). But they leave also traces of another story—traces I will seek to read in the pages that follow.

## NOTES

1. While I am aware of Judith Butler's convincing discussion of the way *gender* has been hypostasized in feminist criticism (7–13), I find the word an irreplaceable way of describing the pattern of behavior expected of middle class British women raised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Given a sexually dichotomized culture, the way in which one's body is categorized—as either female or male—inevitably shapes much of what one experiences as a social being.

2. Barbara Foley criticizes Lukacs in somewhat similar terms, rejecting his "reflectionist model" as outmoded (18). Defining ideology as the "nexus of concepts by which individuals represent to themselves their situation in the social world" (87), Foley argues that an unproblematized mimesis would tend to reinforce the culture's dominant ideology. The role of mimetic fiction, then, is to show the conflict preceding synthesis (98), exposing ideological contradictions rather than rationalizing them. "The knowledge that fiction conveys," Foley writes, summing up her argument, "is the knowledge of the contradictory subjective appropriation of an objective social reality" (96).

3. For Lukacs the historical novel has no generic identity (242). Ideally, the writer will have the same relation to past eras that he does to the present. Thus the "classical historical novel" is not essentially different from the novel of social conditions. But in practice, the historical novel does exist as a distinct genre

because the 1848 revolutions and the triumph of the bourgeoisie cut writers off from the populace and from any sense of an organic, meaningful line of historical development (206–50).

4. “The first act of the feminist critic,” Judith Fetterley writes, “must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in her” (xxii). Fetterley’s use of the term *resistant* obviously differs from Freud’s. I would argue that both kinds of resistance—the repetition wrought by repression and the exposure wrought by feminist self-awareness—operate in the subjects of this study.

5. Laura Riding seems to be thinking along similar lines when she calls historical fiction “ghoulish” (*Trojan* xvii).

6. Ironically the genre also allowed for a more explicit treatment of sexuality than would otherwise have been acceptable. Mitchison comments that sex “in wolf skins and togas” seemed to be acceptable, where any explicitness in her contemporary fiction triggered objections from her publishers (*You May Well* 179). Its historicity presumably distanced the material and gave it a scholarly context that made it more acceptable. Anthropology seemed to operate under a similar dispensation in regard to sexual explicitness.

7. See Garber’s *Vested Interests* as well as Newton and de Lauretis.

8. With Shaw, I would exclude novels of the recent past from the category “historical fiction.” Fleishman suggests the following set of characteristics: historical novels are set at least 40–60 years in the past, involve historical events which affect the characters, and include at least one “real” person and a realistic background (3).