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## The Desires of History, Old and New

In the second half of the twentieth century we have become increasingly fascinated by the thoroughly enigmatic, by the unrelentingly aporetic, by paradoxes that "do not mask any hidden unity which analysis can reveal."<sup>1</sup> We have made it our project not just to unearth the contradictions that underlie our apparent unities, but to leave those contradictions unresolved. This critical attitude has emerged under different names in various intellectual scenes, but postmodernism is perhaps the most generally accepted term for the wide array of similar explorations occurring in different fields. Postmodern types of analysis have rattled the foundations of many historical edifices, one of the most important of such edifices being the idea of history itself.

Postmodern concepts always arise as disagreements. We may clarify some of the main disagreements concerning the nature of history by considering the two temporal poles that have become prominent considerations in a wide array of twentieth-century thought. We find the two poles called by a number of different names. Ferdinand de Saussure and structuralism have given us "diachronic" and "synchronic," two of the more common and useful terms in the humanities, derived from the Greek—"dia" meaning across or through, "syn" meaning same, "chronos" meaning time. But these words basically only designate the apparently simple opposition between chronological or narrative or

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1. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 21.

linear time (the diachronic); and non-chronological, non-linear time, the time in which we exist experientially at any specified moment (the synchronic).

In the most general sense, the traditional kinds of history are diachronic: they assume both the linear sequence of beginning, middle, and end, as well as the crucial cause and effect binding-together of successive times. To many people, this is the "natural" form of history, and the idea of a history that is somehow *not* diachronic does not really make any sense. Nonetheless, the foundation of this kind of history has been seriously shaken by such influential thinkers as Michel Foucault, Thomas Kuhn, Paul de Man, Hayden White, and the various "new historicisms" that have come after them. Though of course there are differences among these thinkers, they are all related in their skeptical attitudes toward the traditional, narrative history of change. Foucault and Kuhn, for instance, in their different ways have established a kind of history that refuses to tell the story of change in the conventional cause and effect fashion. Each posits synchronic structures of knowledge (Kuhn's paradigm, Foucault's episteme) that bind together coexisting actors in a definable historical epoch. But when they speak of change, they do not give us the story of a more or less continuous current of causal movement that occasionally rumbles onto the rocks of climactic, monumental events. Rather, they describe temporal discontinuities happening largely by chance and in the form of ruptures and sudden breaks. It is the "by chance" that most disturbs those who would reject this kind of history, but nonetheless chance is essential to any truly synchronic explanation. Foucault, for instance, in his famous essay on Nietzsche, says outright that the "forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflict . . . they always appear through the singular randomness of events."<sup>2</sup> Foucault's histories are exemplary both in their detailed descriptions of different historical epochs, specifiable "instants" or slices of time we might say, and in their refusal to be concerned with explanations of why one epoch should come before or after another.

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2. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 88.



Kuhn's description of paradigm-shifts in the history of science is similar to Foucault's kind of history, though not as extreme because Kuhn does offer at least some explanation for why there should be the more or less abrupt transformation of one period into the next. Still, Kuhn's version of historical change will not really satisfy those who require a developmental purpose in history. In describing the usual state of affairs ("normal science"), he includes an essentially "arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident" as a "formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time."<sup>3</sup> And, to make matters worse, he finds that revolutionary change happens not because of the progressive breakthroughs of great thinkers gradually drawing closer to some final truth, but because normal science "goes astray" from whatever present set of "professional commitments" (Kuhn, 6). For his part, de Man argues against the linear narrative that makes up the armature of all diachronic histories, because such a narrative sets up "a temporal hierarchy that resembles a parental structure in which the past is like an ancestor begetting, in a moment of unmediated presence, a future capable of repeating in its turn the same generative process."<sup>4</sup> To de Man (as with Foucault, but not Kuhn), the appeal to any such history attempts to make ontologically solid the entirely symbolic constitution of human consciousness, and for this reason such histories are false and even naive.

Though the specific texts to which I have referred are now some years old, their ideas still underlie many of our current notions of history. The postmodern turn to synchronic, nonlinear historiography is an integral feature of what I will call the various new historicisms; that is, interpretive practices such as ethnic, gender, and cultural studies. Whatever their differences, all these analytical frameworks share the fundamental premise that reality in itself is not diachronic, that notions of time and change are human constructions imposed upon otherwise non-narrative events. Given this interpretation of history, the question almost

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3. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970), 4. All further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

4. Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 164.



programmatically arises: "What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story?"<sup>5</sup> De Man's description of the desire for "unmediated presence" is one answer to this question. But of course if notions of time and change are human constructions, then the opposite question must necessarily be asked of those I am calling the synchronic or postmodern historians: what wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to lack the linear connectivity of cause and effect over time?

As discussed by theoreticians, these contradictory ideas of history seem abstract and remote, but in fact they dwell intimately with us in the ramshackle house of everyday life. Like the framing hidden inside our mental and cultural walls, they are seldom seen, though we depend upon them. Discursive analysis can of course lay bare this framing by logically disassembling the walls, but we count on literature to reveal in more emotional ways the secret dependencies of human beings and on contemporary literature to reveal our own historical home to us. Since World War II, there has been a fairly widespread turn by novelists to considerations of history. Nowhere is this more evident than in recent British fiction. It is not too strong to suggest that the turn to history as a theme may be the definitive element in British fiction of the last three decades. Writers such as Graham Swift, Martin Amis, A. S. Byatt, Julian Barnes, Peter Ackroyd, John Fowles, Jeanette Winterson, Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, and many others have all given us novels that consider history as a central issue. But no one has contributed more to the contemporary novel of history than Penelope Lively. She has considered in many of her books the enigmas of time and self. But her two best novels (to my mind), *Moon Tiger* (1987, winner of the prestigious Booker Prize) and *Cleopatra's Sister* (1993), deal directly with the essentially enigmatic relationship of synchrony and diachrony, and in the process offer us moving answers to the above questions about the desire of history.

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5. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 4.

Now, in a way, of course, no novelist can avoid dealing with the difference between the two temporal poles. To write narrative is to be engaged most powerfully by both aspects of time. But Lively considers the paradoxical polarity of time directly. Her main characters, as we shall see, are all historians of one kind or another, and history is an overt theme in both books. In fact, both conceptually and structurally the novels themselves make a kind of dialectical pair because each is oriented toward an opposite pole: *Moon Tiger* is oriented toward the here and now, synchronic, nonchronological time, while *Cleopatra's Sister* is oriented toward diachronic, chronological time.

In *Moon Tiger*, Lively attempts to write what her narrator calls a "realistic kaleidoscopic history."<sup>6</sup> The story is told as the death-bed narrative of Claudia Hampton. Claudia has been a successful journalist and writer of popular histories, but her life has been deeply scarred by her short-lived love affair with a tank commander in World War II. She had met and fallen in love with the soldier, Tom Southern, while she was on assignment in Egypt, but their affair ended as soon as it had begun, when Tom was killed in action. Because she is dying, Claudia has reached the end from which, as Walter Benjamin has said, a person's true history "first assumes transmissible form."<sup>7</sup> Benjamin's famous statement about death and the possibility of storytelling makes the paradoxical point that the full story of one's life may only be known when that life has reached its "full" ending: death. Only then may the beginning and middle that are exactly specific to that one existence be established, because we can only establish the beginning and middle in relation to the exact ending for which they must prepare. Given this, strictly speaking, no individual may know his or her own full story: it must be told by another. But of course, resisting this mortal necessity, we work away at making what we can of our stories as we near our ends. At her end, Claudia sets out to tell the whole story, not just of her life, but of the world, because in her mind the two

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6. Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 80. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

7. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 94.



cannot realistically be separated. I will tell a "history of the world," she says. "And in the process, my own" (1).

Death in Benjamin's myth of the storyteller, however, enables the *chronological* narrative, and this narrative is not what Claudia wants. For chronology "irritates" her: "There is no chronology inside my head. I am composed of a myriad Claudias who spin and mix and part like sparks of sunlight on water. The pack of cards I carry around is forever shuffled and re-shuffled; there is no sequence, everything happens at once" (2). Like sparks of sun on water, like the unpredictable shuffles of a deck of cards, and in another common image, like the random rearrangements of colored glass in a kaleidoscope (2, 3, 80): these metaphors express a notion of history that cannot be satisfied by the "tidying up" of the actual "chaos of everywhere, all time" into the linear cleanliness of a narrative sequence. Because diachronic histories (chronology) have no choice but to clear away one path of evidence through the forest of experienced events, they are untrue to what we live. The "actual" past has, of course, always already eluded our grasp just as we reach for it. What we do know of the past occurs as the synchronicity of coexisting mental associations ("inside the head"), and such associations are bound to each other by all manner of connections, their places in a sequence being important at some times and irrelevant at others. Such is the version of history preferred by Claudia.

This version of history has significant consequences for all of our other concepts. In rejecting or suspending chronology, we at least provisionally reject the conventional idea of cause and effect. We can still have a kind of historiography. We can still say that things change, but we can no longer ascribe change to any sequential, additive development. Claudia clearly enough, then, aligns herself with the kind of historiography made famous by Foucault, Kuhn, and company. The concept of the self also depends upon the concept of history. From the synchronic perspective, we do not experience a chain of events and so, as a result of "development by accumulation" (Kuhn 2), progressively learn to be the true self we were always supposed to become. Rather, as Claudia says, our selves are like museums ("we carry a museum inside our heads") in which the steadily increasing number of past events is constantly being rearranged according to different themes. What matters



about the objects in the museum is the specific *way* they are consciously or unconsciously bound together (thematized we might say) by the present moment of consciousness into a meaningful system of relations. In a real sense, then, *who* we are at a given period of time depends upon the particular arrangement of our collection of memories and how that collection relates to the surrounding cultural museum in which we find ourselves. Considered another way, in rejecting chronology, the diachronic story, we remove the idea of some noumenal, continuous, absolute I that undergirds the changes in an ever-changing, phenomenal self. In fact, given the truth of a synchronic historicity, a discontinuous self becomes the more realistic description of human being, and it is this discontinuity that constantly strikes Claudia. Recalling her grown daughter, Lisa's, childhood, she says that "that Lisa . . . is as dead now as ammonites and belemnites, as the figures in Victorian photographs" (46). On meeting her brother, Gordon, after a four-year separation, she speaks of both of them having been "jolted into another incarnation of ourselves" (71). After giving a capsule chronology of her ex-lover, Jasper's, life, she concludes, "Thus, in general, Jasper. In my head, Jasper is fragmented: there are many Jaspers, disordered, without chronology. As there are many Gordons, many Claudias" (10).

What holds for the individual holds as well on the level of cultural history. The events of the love affair take place in World War II Egypt, and, in war as in peace, the ancient ruins there bring home the situation of humans and time. For Claudia, though, ancient Egypt is not important as a society in a particular place that came after and before certain other kinds of society. Rather it is a present "indestructible force," an ongoing currency in time that is discontinuous with its chronological past. "Egypt is not then but now, conditioning the way we look at things" today (80). If we accept, again, that no noumenal, absolute Egypt may be found, then Egypt must be the construction of its own and other cultures' perspectives about it: it exists as an exhibit in various cultural museums. Given this as true, then any realistic history of Egypt must be re-oriented as a history of the changing representations of Egypt over time, for it is as such a representation that "Egypt" conditions the vision of whatever present observer. So there are many "Egypts" to



be considered, because there are many different representations to be considered.<sup>8</sup>

What holds for the individual and culture also necessarily holds for the narrator of history. The given, clearly delineated self-identity of the conventional historian violates the nature of the subject at hand. Consequently, instead of the self-effacing, single, neutral narrative voice of most histories, Claudia declares outright that she "shall use many voices in this history" (8). In fact, Lively constructs *Moon Tiger* in such a way as to take seriously her narrator's attitudes, though of course there are limits to what she can do. The historian cannot somehow step outside her own voice, but she can try to alter her own voice, to give voice to others. So, the book flickers back and forth between points of view. We will be given the memory of one event as told by "I" (who is nearly always Claudia), then after a space in the text, the same event will be told through a conventionally omniscient third-person narration, then it will be told through a third-person narration limited to one character, and then told through another limited third-person perspective. With respect to chronology, the book moves entirely unsequentially, shifting to various earlier scenes according to the present associations in Claudia's mind.

The novel is, then, in its structure a synchronic history, one in which the narrow, cause-and-effect sequence gives way to a kaleidoscope of voices, times, places. But having said all this, it is important to notice that Lively does not simply reject the idea of chronological history, and in fact in a roundabout way she condemns those who do. "Not even the most maverick historian," says Claudia, "would deny that the past rests upon certain central and indisputable facts. So does life; it has its core, its centre" (70). As the historian cannot step outside her own voice, so she cannot simply step outside chronology. Another way of saying this is that it is not possible to avoid *valuing* certain events more

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8. The connections between Lively's "Egypt" and new historicism, particularly postcolonial studies, will be apparent. What Lively says of Egypt has been said of other sites of antiquity. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* mentions recent reconsiderations of Greek antiquity that "have accentuated the extraordinary influence of today's anxieties and agendas on the pure (even unpurged) images we construct of a privileged, genealogically useful past, a past in which we exclude unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives" (New York: Vintage, 1994), 15.



or less than others. In fact, postmodern versions of history claim that chronological history, simply in its narrative structure, always inscribes value as if it were somehow intrinsic to reality, rather than a construction of language and desire. This is what de Man has in mind when he argues against chronological histories because they unavoidably set up "a temporal hierarchy" that is dependent upon a purely mythical "moment of unmediated presence."<sup>9</sup> This inbuilt, imaginary "moment of unmediated presence" is the absolute value of desire, but it is a kind of fantasy: through it we can believe that we are, ultimately at least, solidly real selves.

So far we have been considering Hayden White's question of the desire of history only in relation to "old" history, the old model of linear cause and effect over time. But since all attitudes about time are social-psychological constructions, then a synchronic attitude toward time must also express a desire. Does synchronic historiography depend upon a fantasy of its own? In fact, we may wonder if the desire underlying a synchronic historiography is, precisely, that value can somehow be avoided. Significantly, one of the criticisms of new historical "thick descriptions" is that they seem to place all historical evidence on the same level, giving as much analytical value to an anecdote or minor passage from a minor work or event as to what have previously been considered monumental works or events. So we must ask: what may be gained if we can leave value out of history? On the one hand, we may escape pre-established, oppressive, "natural" valuations that have been built into the narratives handed down to us. We may at last give just historical consideration, that is, equal time, to those nations and groups who have been systematically devalued by previous histories. But on the other hand, if we are not keenly aware, we may wind up recapitulating some of the faults of the diachronic history. Whereas chronology can satisfy the egoism of the present by showing the developmental superiority of the present to the past, a shallowly conceived synchrony can satisfy the egoism of the present by outright rejecting the past and thus making the present seem entirely self-constituted.

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9. de Man, 164.



Lively shows us the negative results of such a historical attitude in the person of Claudia's lover, Jasper. Claudia gives much time to discussing Jasper's history, in particular the faded Russian aristocratic father whom Jasper rejects as a failure at life and at parenting. When Claudia points out both certain facial features as well as the "rather dramatic past" with which Jasper's father has endowed him, Jasper simply denies it. "I am what I make myself," he claims. A "thousand turbulent years of history . . . has nothing to do with me" (64). Of such an attitude about the past, Claudia says that "Jasper will have none of either nature or nurture because Jasper is sublimely egotistical, and the egotist of course sees himself as self-propagated" (65). If de Man and other poststructuralists have shown us the self-serving, secret appeal of an unthoughtful diachrony, Lively has shown us the same in an unthoughtful synchrony.

Having looked at *Moon Tiger*, a book that enacts, so to speak, synchrony in the way it is written, and makes a point of including along the way the necessity of diachrony, we may now turn to *Cleopatra's Sister*, a book plotted in a relentlessly diachronic line, but a book that includes the necessity of the synchronic along the way. Briefly, the story involves paleontologist Howard Beamish, journalist Lucy Faulkner, and a fictional north-African desert country called Callimbia (Cleopatra's sister is a famous statue in the nation's capital). The first half of the book is divided into twelve chapters that alternate between the three protagonists (Callimbia is presented as a kind of character). Three each of the twelve are devoted exclusively to Lucy and Howard, six devoted exclusively to Callimbia. The first chapter is Howard's and opens by explaining how, because of early childhood events, he became a paleontologist. Then we are introduced to Callimbia and given a brief history beginning with Gondwanaland, the great primeval mega-continent. Then we meet Lucy and learn the reason she was born at a certain place and time. The following chapters continue along chronologically through Lucy's and Howard's adolescence and early adulthood, while Callimbia comes up through Roman times and the Middle Ages to the present. The second part of the book drops the alternating chapters because it begins when Lucy, Howard, and Callimbia have all come together in time and space. The two protagonists, though flying on the same jet to Kenya, have never met, but



when the jet develops engine trouble and lands in Callimbia, they do meet and in fact fall in love. Unfortunately, Callimbia has just undergone a military coup, and the passengers become hostages, used as bargaining chips in an international power struggle. The second half of the novel portrays the steady development of love alongside, or rather within, the ongoing story of diplomatic maneuvering.

Lively here builds her plot in the most conventional beginning, middle, and end fashion, and does not fail to cement everything together with causal explanations, quite the opposite of *Moon Tiger*. However, interestingly enough, *Cleopatra's Sister* actually stresses that which the diachronic narrative structure typically wants either to forget or to rope into a secret design of fate: chance, contingency, the randomness and arbitrariness of human lives and history. "Howard Beamish," the book opens, "became a paleontologist because of a rise in the interest rate when he was six years old."<sup>10</sup> The rise in interest rate forces the Beamish family to vacation at a British resort famous for its fossil cliffs, rather than at Costa Brava as originally planned. "Lucy Faulkner was born in Luton because her father met a man in a pub who had a good wheeze going with cheap leather jackets from Spain" (21). Her father decides to go into business with this man and calls Lucy's pregnant mother to Luton, where Lucy is born. Howard lands his crucial first teaching job, not because of his qualifications, but because one party in a professorial power-struggle happens to have a wreck and misses the interview (45-46). It is "by accident" that he finds and buys his first home, a basement flat, as a result of which he is thrown together with the "arbitrarily acquired associates" living in the rest of the house, one of whom becomes his first love (46, 55). Lucy lands her first journalist position "because one day she leapt too precipitately off a bus, fell and grazed her leg." She must dash into a nearby store for new stockings and by chance meets a friend who tells her about a job-vacancy (71). Howard meets Vivien, the woman who will become his first wife, "because he fell from a borrowed stepladder and broke his kneecap" (83). Vivien happens to be a physical therapist who lives right next to

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10. Penelope Lively, *Cleopatra's Sister* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 3. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.



him. After his divorce, a random meeting with a visiting curator from Nairobi gives him the opportunity to take on a new paleontological research project that will help restore his sense of confidence (95). Lucy scores her most important job because an editor discovers at the last minute that "the colleague that he most disliked" is looking forward to hiring a certain "seasoned hack" instead of Lucy. The editor hires her, not because of her writing ability, but in order to spite the colleague (104). Later, by chance an editor calls Lucy for a travel piece on Africa. She has hit a slack period of work, and has a mortgage to worry about, so she jumps at the opportunity. As a result, she and Howard, because of a life-long series of chances, wind up on the same plane to Nairobi.

Now, the use of chance as a fictional device is hardly new, though it is uncommon to give *every* major event an aleatory cause. But Lively makes the aleatory an active issue in the book, rather than simply a plot-convenience. The narrator of *Cleopatra's Sister* tells us early on that "narrative is a sequence of present moments, but the present does not exist, or exists only as a ripple that runs right through the story, a procession of contingent events leading tidily from birth to death." Lived life, she continues, is "an uneasy balance between the operation of contingency and decision, with the subject tottering precariously between the two from the cradle to the grave" (15-16). Later she mentions the "strange conjunction of likelihood and contingency which is the root of life, in every sense. The accident of reality, and of human existence" (44). The idea of a procession of contingent events perfectly describes this book in particular and the dialectical intertwining of chance and determinism in general. Lively is alive to the self-contradictory meanings of the word "contingency." As used in the quotes above it means happening by chance, without any certifiable cause, undetermined. Events come before and after each other in a linear procession, but a following event cannot easily be said to depend upon its predecessor. In this same way Howard, discussing evolution with Lucy, describes the process of natural selection and survival as "remarkable and precarious. An accident of contingency" (143).

But on the other hand contingency can mean dependent upon. In the opening of the first "Callimbia" chapter, we read that "These events are chronological: they take place in sequence and are in some senses contingent upon one



another." Now, to be contingent upon is to be indispensable. "Remove one [event in the sequence]—extract a decade, or a century—and the whole historical edifice will shift on its foundations" (17). The events, once cemented into the historical construction, appear to be utterly interdependent, but of course this "edifice is itself a chimera, a construct of the human intellect . . . the events are myths and fables, distortions and elaborations of something that may or may not have happened" (17). Nonetheless, this idea of contingency becomes quite as important as its opposite. For though we may look at the past and readily find only random conjunctions, we may also look at it and readily find steel-reinforced necessity. Above, I cited the chance nature of Lucy's birth. In looking back upon her early years and especially her relationship with her father, she finds that "in retrospect, [it] seemed as arbitrary as the connection with Luton" (22). On the other hand, Howard, looking back over the history that has led to his failed marriage, suddenly feels as if "he had been doomed to Vivien from the start" (7). Later, he says to Lucy of his childhood interest in fossils that "thence springs, I suppose, my entire life" (184). Lucy generally feels that we are "granted a degree of control over [our] own destiny." But in private she feels "that sometimes the whole inexorable narrative seemed as though it had you by the nose, as if it led you relentlessly towards the people and the places waiting for you out there" (70).

What *Lively* has given us, then, is the essentially contradictory nature of human temporality. In an important way, history is both random and determined. The events leading up to Lucy and Howard becoming hostages have all been shown to be randomly occurring in themselves, and yet these events *must* all be mentioned in explaining how they come to fall in love. In fact, granted the need to explain why and how their relationship begins, these past events are all the only events that ever could have happened. Retrospectively, it seems as if all other possibilities had to have been closed off from the beginning, if the present was going to happen in just its specific form. After they have fallen in love, Lucy imagines how, once they have been freed, things will return to normal, "as though none of this had happened." But Howard disagrees. "On the contrary. It will inform subsequent events. Everything does" (165). And in this same sense, Lucy thinks, of their captivity, that "all



our lives we've been converging upon this—slowly, slowly” and of “the mysterious narrative of [Callimbia], flowing also towards this moment” (193, 195). This feeling of the present always having been an inescapable conclusion to the past reaches its most intense moment when Howard fears for his life. Several of the male hostages are rounded up and forced to draw straws in order to choose who will be executed as a demonstration of Callimbia's political will. Howard, through the sheer luck of the draw, gets the short straw. “Of course, he thought. It was always going to be me” (267). Taken to an execution cell that he had been shown earlier, Howard thinks, “Of course. I always knew we were coming here” (270).

I have shown how Lively constructs *Cleopatra's Sister* in the most conventional chronological fashion, and yet how a strong thematic attention to the aleatory tends to undermine the main purpose of narrative history. But in fact the book is more exactly complementary to *Moon Tiger* than I have shown. The earlier book formally restacks the stories of the chronological structure, shifting back and forth from level to level according to the specific associations “in the head” of a particular person, Claudia Hampton, rather than according to a progressive, temporal line. However, the temporal line inevitably maintains itself. In fact, logically speaking, there must first be a diachronic chain *in order to* recognize the aleatory nature of events. In other words, chance in general presupposes order; how could you recognize chance unless you somehow first have in mind (if only unconsciously, structurally) the concept of order? Similarly, how could you have a synchronic notion of temporality, unless you somehow first have the concept of diachrony? The idea of a slice of time depends upon the existence of a temporal chain: the idea of everything happening at once depends upon some ongoingness from which the at-once may be distinguished. The two ostensibly opposite elements both necessarily presuppose each other. So, *Moon Tiger* would have to admit diachrony, no matter what, and Lively is most insightful in representing just this problematic necessity. For though the synchronic and diachronic types of history typically seem to render each other invalid—cause and effect over time would appear to be necessarily either true or untrue—nonetheless the two orientations are not simply mutually exclusive. But neither



will they synthesize into some self-consistent whole. We cannot discover a third temporal category that will somehow defuse the antagonism between them: there is no hidden unity that our analysis can reveal. In an important sense, each moment is constantly both patched together and torn apart by both aspects of time.

But what of *Cleopatra's Sister* in this respect? How does the construction of the novel remain plainly chronological and yet also make plain the necessity of synchrony? Moving through the first half of *Cleopatra's Sister*, the reader stumbles, in each of Lucy and Howard's three chapters, over a sudden, displaced, italicized quotation. For instance in the first chapter, in the midst of the story of how the young Howard became an atheist, we suddenly read, set off from the surrounding prose:

*'Do you believe in God?' Lucy asked.*

*'Of course not,' he said. 'Do you?'* (11)

To this point the reader knows nothing whatsoever of a Lucy. One of these interpolations will appear in each of Lucy and Howard's chapters, and some will not even offer a name to identify the speaker. They drop like stones into the current of the story, without introduction or explanation. We have no way to understand where they come from at the time we first read them. In part 2, when the plane has landed in Callimbia and the individually-oriented chapter titles cease, the interjections cease as well. But then, occasionally, reading along the last half of the book, a certain couple of passing conversational lines will seem familiar. They are the interjected passages from the first half of the book. So for instance Lucy asks Howard, "Do you believe in God?" Howard, after a brief narratorial description, responds "Of course not. Do you?"<sup>11</sup> Lively has injected the future directly into the past, so that retrospectively it seems that the future was somehow already happening in the past we read through earlier, that is, the present of part 1. Or, from the present perspective in part 2 it seems as if the present has already happened in the past. In either case, an unsettling tremor jolts our accustomed temporal framework (as witnessed by the difficulty of explaining all this). Howard considers this

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11. 196; the other examples of these achronic repetitions occur on pages 28 and 231, 56 and 165, 71 and 142, 90 and 238, 105 and 198.

notion early in the book. Looking back on his childhood at one point he sees a "vision of the entire direction of a life latent at any single moment, implicit in the scheme of things, as though a silent refrain from the future were woven into the narrative" (7). Now on the one hand this achronological intrusion of the future makes the linearity of time seem ironclad indeed: the necessity of the outcome of the present is so strong that the future is already locked in, right at the moment. But on the other hand what becomes of linear time if the future seems to be happening before itself? If the present is already the future? The concepts of past, present, and future begin to crumble in upon each other.

Having considered how Lively's two novels investigate the contradictory notions of history and self, we need to look more specifically at how she answers the question of desire in historymaking. Both the diachronic and the synchronic histories help us plaster over the cracks in our psychic, social, and political walls, but, as Lively poignantly shows us, each repair paradoxically brings about new damage. We have seen how the core of Claudia's life coincides with the violent, corpse-strewn core of the twentieth century. Though she experiences other involvements with men, the brief affair in Egypt is the "kernel, the vital centre" (*Moon Tiger*, 12), the one true event of love for her. Such love for most of us occurs as a fabulous renewal, a rebirth, a monumental beginning second only to childbirth. But, tragically, for Claudia the beginning is also the ending, and so the event of most value in her life flares up and vanishes in a brief flash of time, almost in an instant. The chronology of her life after Southern's death can be told, but it will be a story purely of decline, with no gain to match the loss in the beginning. So we can see why she turns against diachrony, for it is not quite enough to say that diachrony "irritates" her: in fact, taken as the only version of history, it condemns her. The synchronic perspective can help save her because it dissolves the iron chain of loss that grounds her particular chronology. In fact, she is struck with "wonder . . . that nothing is ever lost, that everything can be retrieved, that a lifetime is not linear but instant. That, inside the head, everything happens at once" (68). A synchronic view of time can offer this relief.



But only at a price. At the end of the novel, back again in the present of her death-bed, Claudia receives by mail Tom Southern's battle-front diaries (by chance his sister has made the connection between the woman mentioned in the diaries and Claudia). In them, he gives on-the-scene accounts of the experience of war, mixed with thoughts of love. After reading the diaries, Claudia thinks aloud, to Tom, the consequences of her irritation with chronology. "We are no longer in the same story . . . I am someone else . . . You are in some ways unreachable, shut away beyond a glass screen of time" (206). Rejecting diachrony may save us from the corrosive burden of loss and failure, because it seems to give us different selves rather than developing (or decaying) versions of the same underlying self. The loss is not a part of who we are now, so we can stand safely apart from our pain. The corollary of such rescue, of course, is that we are walled off also from our past pleasures and victories.

At the end of *Cleopatra's Sister*, the hostages are released at the last moment, and the relieved reader is left with a love affair that will have the chance to develop beyond its beginning. But Howard Beamish, whose occupation involves explaining evolutionary change, finds himself wishing away the narrativizing that is sure to come. "He did not want to hear the reverse account of everything—the explanations, the justifications, the complementary facts which would illuminate their . . . experience." He prefers, as most of us do at one time or another, to leave things somehow in what feels like their raw state, "irrational and inexplicable" (281). He does not want the historical explanations because they will have "nothing to do . . . with the whole contingent sequence" of the real. But even if history is a kind of fantasy about otherwise non-narrative events, it cannot somehow be avoided. We are always inescapably in it. Thus, in the very next thought Howard, in spite of his desire, cannot resist narrativizing. "He considered this sequence: he dismantled it and looked at its component parts, at moments which could have flown off in some other direction, at the whole precarious narrative" (282). With this concluding thought, the novel gives us another expression of the unresolvable conflict between narrative history and experience. On the one hand, every moment of experience will already be defined by a linear story because we are always embedded



in histories; there could only be a raw, untemporalized experience if there were no histories already in place. Howard finds the narrative already to have occurred, no matter how inadequate it may feel with respect to the real events. On the other hand, each moment must always be its unique, uncapturable experiential self, entirely apart from histories. The idea of history and experience presuppose each other in the act of excluding each other. How could you have the historical narrative unless you first had some unnarrativized experience against which to distinguish a sequence? At the same time how could you have untemporalized experience unless you first had historicized experience against which to recognize that which eludes history?

The contradictory both/and element of Lively's investigation of the nature of history is what makes these books so powerful and, thematically at least, so postmodern. We are left at the end in between history and experience. On the one hand, history always fails us because it is a kind of fantasy, and it *does* inevitably miss (as does all symbolic communication) the experiential real that it wants to preserve. As Claudia says of the "dispassionate sequence" of histories of the war, they fail to "explain" the vital center of the great event: the lived battlefield "experience—raw and untreated" as recorded in Tom Southern's diaries. That experience is simply "on a different plane" (207). But if history always misses the real, it remains, like symbolic communication in general, indispensable. I have said that history precludes any raw, untemporalized experience. Actually what it precludes is the *knowledge* of such experience. And yet, how is the experience to make a difference in our selves unless we can somehow think about it in relation to other, previous and possible future experience (even if we think that it is unlike any other experience)? Howard Beamish encounters this problem in his fieldwork. He finds his greatest professional pleasure at the moment of physically chipping out ancient fossilized creatures from their embalming rock, from "the very strata in which [the creature] had perished, the perfect union of time and space." But he also feels a "frisson of reluctance" when he breaks into what had, until just the moment of his interruption, been an absolutely past, "exquisite unity of rock." He has, of course, no choice but to end this beauty if



he is to recognize it, if he is to understand that in "life that has vanished but remains eternally present," we have "the ultimate proof of the past" carrying on into the present (89). The same holds for the excavation of our own pasts. If we are to know our experience, we must historicize, and as soon as we historicize we have lost the "actual" experience. This latter revelation can seem nihilistic, as if histories of whatever kind forever prevent us from truly experiencing the real thing. Yet this is not nihilistic at all. For what would it mean to have experience and *not* be able to think about it? In what sense would we have had the experience at all, if we could not think of it in relation to other events, which is to say in relation to history? History may always fail to give us what we want of the real, but without it we would not have anything at all.<sup>12</sup>

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12. This work was supported, in part, by funds provided by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.



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