Women and Romance

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The Romance of History,
or
Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny,
Sometimes

This book is primarily a formal analysis; it focuses on enduring problems of distinguishing and defining form, in this case the English novel, not on the specific and changing historical conditions within which that novel develops. Yet from a feminist perspective one of the material problems in women’s relation to the definition of form must be the problem of the material. Many feminist literary critics—such as Biddy Martin, Nancy Armstrong, Cora Kaplan, Mary Poovey, or Gayatri Spivak—have argued that we need to give renewed attention to material conditions in order to understand the role of gender within the novelistic tradition—and, along with that, to analyze our cultural situation properly and perhaps also to change it. That attention would take the form of an attention to history and the historical process, which such critics claim might grant some access to the material, perhaps enough to help us modify our conditions.¹

These feminist investigations that attend to material context have been invaluable. In this chapter, however, while not denying or refusing the material, I open up the questions I ask later on by

approaching the question of the material more skeptically. Some of
the assumptions guiding me throughout this book have to do with
the importance of feminist debate: it seems crucial to me that femi­
nist scholarship expand and extend the category of the political,
rather than restricting it to analyses that privilege the material or
historical in certain ways. Indeed, as Biddy Martin suggests, one of
the strengths of feminism may well be the differences and diver­
gences of its approaches. She writes: “What Leftists have criticized
in the woman’s movement as fragmentation, lack of organization,
absence of a coherent and encompassing theory, and the inability
to mount a frontal attack may very well represent fundamentally
more radical and effective responses to the deployment of power in
our society than the centralization and abstraction that continue to
plague Leftist thinking and strategy.” The political usefulness of
feminist material and historical analyses does not, it seems to me,
preclude useful feminist analyses that also may wish to question
some of the assumptions encoded within recourse to the material
and historical.

The material remains an important focus in this study, then, but
precisely because of the ways we do not have direct access to it. I
want to focus on the material, but on how our textualizations of it
give it the very shape we recognize as material. One of the most
important of those textualizations might be called “history.” Rather
than dispense with the category of the historical, in this chapter I
emphasize its identity as a category, a representation, a form. I am
most interested here in the ways our relation to history remains
complicated and uncertain, and the way that those uncertainties
can expose, if not undo, the codifications of gender.

Rather than seek to trace the historical determinants of women
and romance, I argue that looking for such answers hides (and may
close off) another question: just what purposes can be served by
the recourse to history? Just as I am concerned not so much with
the meanings of “women” and “romance” as with the practice that
determines them and the uses to which they are put, in this chap­
ter I consider what the recourse to history allows. In what ways can
the category of history—when its own status as a problematic form
is bracketed—cover over and shore up strategies of dominance,
specifically in terms of gender? Feminist critics who ground their work in history have been instrumental in exposing the way that category is gendered. I extend their analysis by examining key critics interested in history—Ian Watt and Fredric Jameson—who work instead at times as if history were removed from gender.

I

The "rise of the novel" is often seen as an important development in literary history, for it is explained according to and also seems to confirm the connections between literature and history. The novel's self-definition rests not just on making romance formally marginal (as the rest of this book demonstrates) but also historically prior to it. It sets up romance as an origin out of which it evolves—and evolution implies superiority. Romance supposedly comes first in this scenario because it is seen as incomplete and inadequate; the novel defines its difference from romance by outgrowing and surmounting it. Rather than accepting such historical conventions, and defining the novel and romance as fixed forms in a progressive chain, I examine just how and why this particular convention works and what it tells us about some of the assumptions of (literary) history.

Ian Watt, for example, for all his careful scholarship and sophistication, differentiates the novel from romance using a theory of history that ultimately assumes an unvexed referentiality. His own recourse to the historical facts of the rise of individualism in eighteenth-century England (a historical narrative he assumes without examining it as a narrative, without questioning what purpose this discourse of individualism might serve, in its own historical context, or in our own) parallels the transparent referentiality of language that he argues is a key element in the rise of the novel out of romance. In Watt's argument, the consolation that material fact supplies, especially when equated with the fixed meanings of words or fixed definition of form, is especially underwritten by the supposedly clear and natural fixity of gender. The Oedipal scenario that is the subtext of Watt's formal and historical evolution props up that evolution; at the same time, it defuses, by sexualizing in a clear gender hierarchy, the problems of the dominant discourse it serves and with which it identifies—a discourse that underwrites
the unity and autonomy of the individual subject. But Watt’s read-
ings, especially of Richardson, uncover gender slippages that not
only put his argument into question but raise questions about the
subject’s autonomy and the resulting male dominance that his ar-
gument needs to assume.

Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, more explicitly ex-
amines the way our relation to the material is always mediated.
Yet, although his argument subtly details the problems involved in
history’s textualization of events, its use of history still reveals the
consolatory function of history. For in Jameson’s argument, the
historical process, as he defines it when discussing and defining
the novel’s difference from romance, points to a place of freedom
for that very argument—outside the dominant discourse. It does
so precisely through its use of unexamined gender biases: in his
discussion of romance, Jameson relies on the fantasy of the pre-
Oedipal mother, who exists to reflect back the self, convincing the
infant that the outside world is actually a sustaining part of him.
This fantasy also, however, supplies a wishful figure for the critic’s
harmonious coexistence with the dominant system in which he
works. Jameson’s particular method of historicizing, which he
claims subsumes all other methods, and his discussion of the novel
as the all-encompassing sedimented form attempt to make his par-
ticular vision of history not just one more textualization but a vi-
sion that merges with the absent ground of the material itself.

My investigation of history ends in this chapter with a reading of
literary fictions, setting up my interpretive practice by demonstrat-
ing, through the category of history, the novel’s connections to the
romance it rejects. George Meredith’s fiction also plays with and
acts out the consoling function of the gender assumptions that I
find in Watt and Jameson. Meredith’s work is also predicated on a
notion of historical evolution, and he explicitly ties it to a pro-
gression out of egoism, out of an attachment to the self. *The Egoist*,
for example, works from the assumption that man’s natural de-
velopment is out of primitive self-centeredness into decentered com-
community; the book explicitly claims that the realistic account of
events, which characterizes the novel, properly leaves behind the
sham and sensuality of romance, which are the trappings of ego-
ism. Yet the problems of egoism that Meredith projects out of his
novel onto romance actually mask a longing for individualism and
for the power it implies. *Diana of the Crossways* demonstrates the contradictions in Meredith’s history and the way that gender relations are crucial to exempting men and novels from the harsh anti-individualism of his system. Diana’s difference from Willoughby, the difference of gender, is what preserves this patriarchal egoism; her properly feminine loss of herself in Redworth allows that hero, uncriticized, the “marriage with a mirror” that Willoughby seeks.\(^3\) Such osmosis protecting the privileged self also relies on pre-Oedipal fantasies, on the image of the all-encompassing, nurturing mother. The fantasy of merging with this mother is meant to undo the extinction of the individual, to repeal the death of the self that seems the very hallmark of Meredith’s modernism. In Meredith’s case, in the familiar logic of negation, his history denies what it most desires.

II

Readers of critical studies of the novel know that critics have difficulty defining the novel, difficulty agreeing on just what it is.\(^4\) The multiplication of definitions and the contradictions among them suggest one lesson that deconstruction has taught: the process of definition undoes itself, the articulation of rules calls them into question. Yet something more is common to definition too: definitions are constructed in service of certain assumptions and goals—constructed within what we may still call ideology if we do not conflate that term with false consciousness, if we recognize that our use of it does not exempt us from it. Rather than attempting to define the novel, we might approach it instead by highlighting the assumptions that press us into certain definitions and the systems generating those assumptions—systems within which we operate whether or not we recognize them. The question would be not so much “what is the novel” but “why do we define it as we do?”

One way critics define the novel is to distinguish it from other forms. Beginning with Dr. Johnson and Congreve, and moving


through Clara Reeve, Sir Walter Scott, all the way to Northrop Frye in the present day, a staple of critical discussion has been to compare the novel to that related form, romance. Any reader of a standard history of the novel, such as Ernest Baker's, is familiar with this comparison. Baker indeed spends the first volume of his *History of the English Novel* locating the novel's roots in various romances. One problem of this approach is that it cannot elude the difficulty of defining the novel by simply shifting the problem onto romance: having the novel and romance describe each other in a tautology of opposition winds up begging the question of definition. Such a move seems to point despite itself to the way meanings are produced within a system of terms rather than resting on some bedrock outside that system. By defining the novel against romance, critics inadvertently suggest that the novel has no fixed meaning, no essence, but takes its place within a sliding chain of signification.

Yet one of the effects of a *history* of the novel is to resist such an assertion; by historicizing this chain, it seems to arrest its slide. Within the assumption of such history, romance, rather than being a counter within a grammar of meanings, becomes fixed—claimed as the first prose form, whether located in ancient Greece, seventeenth-century France, or eighteenth-century England. As the point of origin for the novel, what comes before and generates it, romance becomes the bedrock against which the novel takes its meaning and establishes its identity by establishing its difference.

An emphasis on the primacy of romance in defining the novel often slips imperceptibly over into an emphasis on the primacy of history in defining these forms. Yet the turn from the formal to the

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7In her representative monograph on romance, for example, Gillian Beer emphasizes the critical role of history in defining it. Her study illustrates how the standard
historical too often signals our desire as critics for a solution (to the problem of the definition of the novel, but also to the problem of our relation to past events) where none exists. The emphasis on origin that characterizes histories of fiction cannot cover over the problem of origin within history itself, a problem well rehearsed by historiographers. As Hayden White has observed, the word “history” has no simple and completely certain reference itself because its meanings are so various. He writes: “[‘History’] applies to past events, to the record of those events, to the chain of events which make up a temporal process that includes the events of the past and present as well as those of the future, to systematically ordered accounts of the events attested by the record, to explanations of such systematically ordered accounts, and so forth.”

The problem with a recourse to history is that the idea of history as account is often collapsed with the idea of history as past events. Dominick LaCapra’s general comparison of the novel and romance in terms of the real and fictive already appeals to history—the realm of the real—as the uncontested category that determines meaning. She argues that not only is romance concerned with history (past events), but the definition of something as romance depends on historical positioning: the fictive expression of the disturbing, and even revolutionary, desires of a period may seem realistic—novelistic—to it; but later times, for whom the revolutionary situation is past, reinterpret that expression as romantic—fictive—in order to slot those prior desires back into the status quo, against which it may then form its own reaction (Gillian Beer, The Romance [1970], 13). A more recent anthology about romance insists on the exemplariness of romance in demonstrating the importance of history: it argues that romance, even more than other genres, is determined by and “inextricably bound up with a complex, evolving, historical situation,” attesting to the importance of history (Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee [1985], 1); this emphasis on the relation between romance and history also underlies the approaches within The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction, ed. Jean Radford (1986), which is a volume in Routledge’s History Workshop Series. In his study of the history of the novel, Michael McKeon also connects romance and history, asserting that a changing understanding of the relations between romance and history was crucial to the rise of the novel (McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740 [1987], 25–64). Even Northrop Frye, whose structural anatomy tends toward the ahistorical, temporalizes, if not historicizes, romance, pushing it back toward an origin, arguing that it parallels our first literary experience, “the experience of a child listening to a story” (Frye, Secular Scripture, 51).

Hayden White, “Getting out of History,” Diacritics 12 (1982): 4–5. One of the principal debates within post-structuralism has been just how to maintain “history” as a useful category while at the same time interrogating its claim to truth. For a variety of approaches to this question, see Post-Structuralism and the Question of History, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (1987).
reminds us that as readers we often conjure up history as a “locus for some prediscursive image of ‘reality,’” as “an external, extradiscursive ground . . . assumed to solve all basic problems in interpretation, including those that may have been disclosed by one’s own reading of a text.” The problem with this, White argues, is that it eliminates the interpretive act, translating reading into knowledge, analysis into truth:

The difficulty with the notion of a truth of past experience is that it can no longer be experienced, and this throws a specifically historical knowledge open to the charge that it is a construction as much of imagination as of thought . . . [which] puts historical discourse on the same level as any rhetorical performance and consigns it to the status of a textualization neither more or less authoritative than “literature” itself can lay claim to.

Past events are not immediately available to us; history’s documents—the ones it works from as well as its accounts of them—remain texts themselves.

Readers and critics continue to treat history as if, in White’s words, it “were a seamless web and told only one story which could be invoked as a way of defining what is only ‘fictive’ and what is ‘real’” because this appeal seems to permit some kind of authority. The desire for a ground from which to speak that prompts this appeal to the past also operates within that basic filter of past events, memory itself. Freud writes of how memory constructs itself as much out of wishes as actual past events (because it cannot actually distinguish between them), reorganizing, reinterpreting, or even inventing those events to fit the script of the subject’s fantasies, especially, Mary Jacobus points out, the fantasy of its own integrity and completeness, which provides the ground for its very existence. The problems of memory are the problems of history as well. When not qualified and examined (and even, perhaps, despite our attempts to do so), the belief in some access to reality through a historical account can be similarly a bid for autho-

10White, “Getting out of History,” 5.
rizing wholeness, a "dream of 'total history'" that reveals "the historian's own desire for mastery... [his project for] control in a world out of joint."\textsuperscript{13}

Simply to turn to history—in order to define the novel, for instance—does not solve the problems of definition and meaning readers encounter at the formal level because history is itself a form. The practice of history—literary or otherwise—is not anymore in the service of domination than any other practice, but neither does it provide its own access to a ground of pure fact, outside power. The recent critical movement has been away from questions of "pure" form; proponents of the old and new historicism argue, quite rightly, I think, that form is never pure; it is tied up with, and a screen that hides, ideological positions. A discussion of form divorced from its material context, they argue, allows an apparently apolitical stance that is actually highly political, if not conservative and reactionary, in the consolation it supplies by suggesting that there is a realm outside politics or power.\textsuperscript{14} I want to emphasize, however, that the turn to history can also be a consolation which cannot solve (and may not even recognize) our implication as subjects within ideology and systems of power, although it may offer to do so. Neither formal nor historical criticism can be political without an ever vigilant awareness of the complexities of analysis that may well present insoluble problems, such as the always prior textualization of our knowledge. Attempts to solve such problems by closing off or simplifying them act out of unacknowledged wish-fulfillment and may therefore be especially open to appropriation by a regressive status quo.

In some crucial studies that have defined the literary history of the novel, one of the roles given to history puts into play just such covert desires. Ian Watt's \textit{The Rise of the Novel} distinguishes the novel from romance to demonstrate the close relation between literary form and its social context, especially the rise of individualism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England that it claims gives shape to and explains the formal characteristics of the novel. Yet because Watt's study acts out the inability to engage with

\textsuperscript{13}LaCapra, \textit{History and Criticism}, 25.
\textsuperscript{14}See, for example, Mark Seltzer, \textit{Henry James and the Art of Power} (1984), 171–95.
its assumptions that we must all to some degree repeat, within his argument the relations between history and form are often circular. What interests me is where such (inevitable) circularity lies: Watt seems to need assumptions specifically about the gendered individual to prove the relation between literature and history, while at the same time relying on the relation between literature and history to shore up the certainty and privilege on which the very notion of the individual relies.¹⁵

Watt distinguishes the novel from previous forms by its formal characteristics, what he calls its "formal realism," a mode in service of and upheld by that locus of the real, history.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, one key element of formal realism is its treatment of time: "the distinctive role which the novel has added to" literature, Watt argues, is its portrayal of "life by time" (RN.22). This emphasis on time makes the formal and historical dovetail neatly: just as history, as Watt implicitly defines it, depends on causality and evolution, "the novel's plot," he argues, "is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present action" (22). Distinguishing the novel from previous fiction is itself a use of past experience; Watt's argument acts out its own assumptions: it asserts the evolution of the novel out of the form previous to it, romance, to distinguish the novel (it emphasizes causality and plot, for example; romance does not), circularly to uphold the importance of history (the determining category of causality and evolution), and to clinch its own identity as realistically—historically—informed.

Distinguishing the novel in terms of its formal realism not only privileges history but also seems to lay to rest questions troubling the certainty of the relations between form and reality, word and

¹⁵For a different reading of how Watt's theory of the rise of the novel relies on gender assumptions, which also gives a significantly different value to the concept of history even as it investigates history as a discourse conveying power, see Nancy Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction, 28–58; for a further critique of Watt's gender bias, see Dale Spender, Mothers of the Novel: One Hundred Good Women Writers before Jane Austen (1986), 115–37, especially 115–18. For a Marxist critique of Watt's history, which also considers questions of gender, see Terry Lovell, Consuming Fiction (1987), 19–45.

¹⁶Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (1957); "formal realism" is defined on page 32; all future references to this book (hereafter abbreviated RN) will appear in the text.
thing, that get raised in any formal analysis. By seeming to put the
emphasis on the formal (the formal realism of the novel is con-
cerned not with "the kind of life it presents" but "the way it pre-
sents it" [11]), Watt actually strengthens the category of the real in
his argument: although he grants that the scientific objectivity the
novel claims for itself "certainly cannot be realised in practice," he
still winds up implying that there is no significant difference be-
tween the "literary work and the reality it imitates" (11). In contrast
to romance, by concentrating on the closeness "of words to
things," the formal realism of the novel sets up language as "a
purely referential medium" (28). In romance, "language [is] a
source of interest in its own right"; what Locke calls the "abuses of
language" that occur when language is divorced from its referent
(which, "like the fair sex," involve a pleasurable deceit)—these
abuses are, Watt claims, "a regular feature of the romances" and
"much rarer" in novels (28). The comparative here demonstrates
that The Rise of the Novel knows its linguistic philosophy and, seek-
ing to avoid the simplifications of naive epistemology, is careful in
its treatment of referentiality: Watt's discussion of the philosophical
skepticism eroding idealism and his use of cautious qualifiers (for-
amal realism "purports to be an authentic account of the actual expe-
riences of individuals," for example [27; emphasis added]) concede
the impossibility of pure reference. Yet, in arguing that words do
not "all stand for real objects" and that a gap between word and
thing invades "the great bulk of literature" (28; emphasis added),
Watt implicitly reintroduces the wish for what he has demon-
strated "cannot be realised in practice" (11), the possibility of one-
to-one correspondence for some special and privileged literature,
the object of his study, the novel. He goes on to defuse the force of
philosophical skepticism by historicizing it; he implies that the
"semantic problem" of the gap between word and thing, rather
than being an intrinsic element of the structure of language, be-
comes situated in history, merely one period's view of language
(28).

Such historical situating seems to solve the problem of referen-
tiality, to stay the slippage of meaning within words which might
otherwise be unmoored by textual bedrock. History is the antidote
to the uncertainty of reference throughout Watt's argument: for
Watt, historical context keeps in line what Derrida might call the
dissemination of the meanings of a word—its drifting, unruly, multiple associations. For example, Watt remarks that words like "realism" or "original"—both key terms in his definition of the realistic novel, differentiating it from its origin, romance—can actually be difficult themselves to define. Their various meanings contradict each other ("realism," which once meant "universals, classes or abstractions," also now means "the particular, concrete objects of sense-perception" [11]; "original," which once suggested "having existed from the first," now suggests "underived, independent, firsthand" [14]). Rather than questioning the way the interplay between such oppositions troubles his own opposition of the novel and romance, Watt instead refuses to acknowledge that interplay. History is the bar with which he attempts to separate and hold open these opposed meanings, implying that the first meanings, used in the past, remain there, without affecting the present senses of the words—an implication not all of us, including Watt elsewhere in this book, can completely accept.17

In the same way, history is also the bar Watt uses to separate the novel and romance. Formal realism is meant to provide "a working definition of the characteristics of the novel" that is "sufficiently narrow to exclude previous types of narrative" (9). It is important to Watt’s definition that those previous forms must be excluded; somehow the novel must both rise out of them and leave them behind. With a causality that denies the very past it depends on, Watt tells us that the evolution of the novel does not link it to prior forms but depends on "a break with the old-fashioned romances" (10). The facts of history (changes, such as the growth of Protestantism, that prompt the "growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality" [14]) become the extratextual lever meant to effect and attest to

17For one discussion and enactment of the way meaning is interdependent and drifting, see Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (1981). Watt himself admits that such "semantic reversals" (RN.14) are in service of what can be only "attempted rejections" of the past (12; emphasis added). In a deconstructive reading of the instability of meaning, J. Hillis Miller argues that it is just such ambiguity in key terms that "tends to break down . . . generic and historical distinctions. If it does not make literary history impossible, it requires a redefinition of what is meant by ‘genres,’ ‘periods,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘influences,’ ‘history,’ ‘literature’ itself” (J. Hillis Miller, “A Guest in the House: Reply to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s Reply,” *Poetics Today* 2 [1980/81]: 190–91).
“the suddenness and completeness” of the break between the novel and romance (34).

Watt needs to insist on the completeness of the formal break and to attempt to support it with historical fact because his argument does not really establish it in the readings of the novels he supplies. He admits that the very writers he wishes to cast as the first novelists seem unaware of this break. Their structures and language do not mark it: “they did not even canonise the changed nature of their fiction by a change in nomenclature” (10). Without the hindsight of history Watt enjoys, they do not distinguish their novels as novels but continue to call them romances. Fielding, in particular, explicitly aligns his work with the older tradition and because of that poses “something of a challenge to the basic argument” of Watt’s study (239) (and may explain why “regrettably,” Watt says, his “treatment of Fielding is briefer” than of any other writer [7]).

The identification of the novel with past forms such as romance is not Fielding’s problem alone. Despite—in fact, prompting—Watt’s attempt to differentiate them, the novel and romance keep collapsing into each other in his argument. The problem is not that Watt resorts to a larger context to explain local effects, which might have a function screening or even seeming to contradict their immediate interest. The problem is that Watt repeats—without investigating—the very contradictions he purports to resolve. Watt, like the early writers, cannot keep his terminology straight: he proclaims Richardson’s *Pamela* both “the first true novel” (173) and a “romance with a difference” (204), suggesting the impossibility of maintaining any distinct break between them even in his own discussion.

As Watt’s discussion of *Pamela* demonstrates, he invokes history as a bar to try to separate more than the interplay of literary form.

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18Watt claims that “Fielding’s celebrated formula of ‘the comic epic in prose’ undoubtedly lends some authority to the view that, far from being the unique literary expression of modern society, the novel is essentially a continuation of a very old and honoured narrative tradition” (RN. 239). I might argue that that tradition is the romance as well as the epic, for Fielding also does not distinguish between those two terms; his full formula defining his own works, in the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, reads, “Now, a comic romance is a comic epic-poem in prose.” Watt himself underlines this connection, noting that Fielding’s treatment of epic is such as to “put all the French romances in the same category as the *Odyssey* and * Télémaque*” (250). Watt concedes that (in some respects) Fielding is “actually following the example of the French writers of romance a century earlier” (258).
For Watt, *Pamela* is the first true novel largely because of the formal realism of its plot, which, unlike that of its predecessors, avoids being episodic by basing its story "on a single action, a courtship" (135). *Pamela* differs from romance too because of the difference of its treatment of courtship, which involves, among other things, "a more complete and comprehensive separation between the male and female roles than had previously existed" (162). This separation of the sexes, Watt argues, is historically determined, part and parcel of the rise of individualism (136), and such historical reality is once again reflected and guaranteed by language. Watt tells us that this change in gender and its effect on language started to become apparent in the late seventeenth century: men and women began to speak different languages. Watt quotes one writer's ironic suggestion of the need for a dictionary "'to suit our language to the fair sex, and to castrate the immodest syllables in such words as begin and end obscenely'" (163). Although the call for such a text is facetious, Watt repeats it because his argument needs to show that the impulse behind it is not. The novel advances beyond romance in providing just such a text, in recognizing, recording, and maintaining the differences between men and women. The separate sexes are tacitly aligned with the separate forms Watt discusses: he links romance's abuses of language with the deceits of "the fair sex" (28) and charts the way romance appeals to the fantasies of women (204).

Watt uses history to account for what he sees as a change in the relations of the sexes in a way that seems to consider women's subordination carefully and judiciously. He outlines how the convention of elevating women beyond the supposedly lower promptings of sexuality, for instance, may be just another way of enforcing women's oppression:

Exactly why the serpent's invidious connection with Eve should have been forgotten is not clear; one can only surmise that, by a

19See too Frances Ferguson's suggestions about the way such courtship plots in Richardson's work depend on the possibility of rape; she argues that *Clarissa* epitomizes for Watt the rise of the novel in terms of its relation to private experience specifically because rape exemplifies for him (as for culture) the line between the public and the private, and points to the covert gender assumptions within his thought; Frances Ferguson, "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," *Representations* 20 (1987): 88–112, especially on 99–100.
devious process not unknown to the psychologist, the very difficulties in the situation of women at this time brought about a new concept of the feminine role which masked their actual dependence on attractiveness to the male much more completely than before, and strengthened their tactical position in courtship by making their acceptance of a suitor a matter, not of joint personal satisfaction, but of noblesse oblige. (RN.161)

But Watt’s attempt here to read representation in terms of strategy and tactic rather than fact (and note that it is ultimately women who come to seem the tactical maneuverers in his reading, rather than the system of power itself) does not go far enough, does not consider the usefulness of this convention to Watt’s own account—the way the sensitivity of that account to women’s position may also paradoxically enforce her oppression.

Watt may assert a distinction between genders, just as he does between the novel and romance, precisely because that distinction may also be in question. He especially insists on clear gender distinctions with Richardson because, both in the biographical history of Richardson from which he is working and in the novels Richardson writes, those distinctions blur: although Watt claims that attention to domestic detail helps distinguish the novel from romance through its air of everyday reality, Richardson may know too much about such banalities, especially about ladies’ clothing (153): Watt tells us that Richardson shared ladies’ tastes “to a very remarkable degree” (152), and the urbane understatement with which Watt mocks these supposed foibles in Richardson itself may mark enough discomfort with such cross-dressing for him to need to distance himself from and joke about it. Similarly, his discussion of the historical changes influencing Richardson’s work, particularly his relation to the ills of urbanization, returns (perhaps nervously) to the ills of gender. He identifies Richardson’s peculiar talent with nervous ill health, an “anxiety neurosis” that he sees as particularly feminine compared to Fielding’s “robustness” (184): ventriloquizing through D. H. Lawrence, he directly connects Richardson’s novelistic perspective not just with a change in demographics but with (supposedly) diseased femininity, “the mean Jane Austen” and her “old maid” sensibility (185).20 Richardson’s novels con-

20Watt’s comparison of Richardson and Fielding relies implicitly on the ways he identifies them as feminine and masculine respectively: see Watt’s argument about
tinue the feminine perspective supposedly left behind with romance. Watt attempts to explain away this anomaly by attributing it to Richardson’s “deep personal identification with the opposite sex which went far beyond social preference or cultural rapport” (153) (which went as far, in fact, Watt notes—again dryly—as a fear of mice). But such identification suggests a collapse of gender which might be more than idiosyncratic, a general tendency that Watt tries to counter (but cannot quite) with historical facts.

Richardson’s animadversions against “‘hermaphrodite minds’” (which Watt quotes from the introduction to the second edition of Pamela) become Watt’s own. The collapse of the sexes into hermaphrodite minds (canceling the distinctions between bodies) might undo the hierarchy implied in the separation of the sexes. Watt notes that the interplay of gender in Richardson’s work threatens just such male privilege: Pamela “outrageously flatters the imagination of readers of one sex [women] and severely disciplines that of the other [men]” (153–54). Richardson’s works demonstrate the ways “feminine sensibility [is] in some ways . . . at a real advantage in the realm of the novel” (298), not just in the realm of romance. In Watt’s argument, Richardson’s novels reveal how the novel form, like romance, depends on a feminine sensibility, with its detailed observation of “the texture of life” (298)—which Watt despite himself realizes is, according to the logic of his argument, an attention as necessary to the novel’s formal realism as it is demanded by its feminine reading public.

Implicit within Watt’s argument is the assumption that the separation of the sexes is essential, not just historical; the cultural recognition of this separation marks an advancement, a rise out of less enlightened times. Although Watt states that the role of the sexes is only a changing cultural construction—he quotes Margaret Mead’s dictum that “civilization has largely ‘relied for the creation of rich and contrasted values upon many artificial distinctions, the most

Fielding’s masculine spirit, with its deflation of “romantic pretences” (RN.278) and its “wholesome bawdy” (284), an argument that (once again despite claims that it is actually more sensitive to women, sympathizing with rather than condemning “whores in rags” [283], for instance) supplies Watt with a tacit justification for the male privilege of the sexual double standard as part of the “expansion of sympathy” (284) necessary to a true moral education (280–84).  

21The phrase reads “termagant hermaphrodite minds,” and Richardson applies it to Lady Davers, suggesting the way both Richardson and Watt in quoting him make the slippage of gender a female problem, the problem of termagants (RN.163).
striking of which is sex’” (162)—he claims that he himself has no wish to suggest that gender distinctions are “wholly artificial” (162; emphasis added). Throughout his study, Watt’s argument, despite its recognition of women’s subordination, implicitly indicts the leisured-lady reading public produced by the inequities of capitalism. He refers to “the reading public’s uncritical demand for easy vicarious indulgence in sentiment and romance” (290), and such an audience, he implies, accounts for most of Richardson’s excesses; the volubility of his devoted letter writers might be explained by a modern parallel, women’s “extended” use of the telephone (189). Yet such assumptions rely on an attitude about gender, not just economics.

The problem with the collapse of gender, as with any of the other slippages that Watt’s argument tries to counteract, is that it calls into question those “rich and contrasted values” built on the hierarchy resulting from the separation of the sexes. Although Watt ends his study by discussing Jane Austen’s novels as the reconciliation of the divergent—Richardsonian and Fieldingesque—strands of formal realism, Watt also attempts to indict, if not undo, the close relation of femininity to the novel that has caused his argument to contradict itself throughout; he asserts that the relation of the novel to women actually enervates the form—“it is surely true that the dominance of women readers in the public for the novel is connected with the characteristic kind of weakness and unreality to which the form is liable” (299). Although Austen’s work marks the “climax” in this rise of the novel (298), hers is perhaps only “technical genius” (296), something the more technically faulty male writers Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding rise above, “by expressing their own sense of life with a completeness and conviction” (301). Although Watt’s consideration of the social and economic conditions of history allows him a surprising sensitivity to the constraints of women’s role, ultimately his covert assumptions make him translate role into essence; the problems of the novel result from the intrusion of women’s weakness, and woman’s weakness points to man’s superiority and power, just as romance, an inferior form, is improved on by the novel. Watt’s quotation of the seventeenth-century wit, who associated women with “castrate” language, suggests the ways foregrounding established gender assumptions seems particularly to draw off problems of lack
onto women; no matter what their accomplishments, they remain insufficient, incomplete—man goes beyond them to embody a complete whole, just as the novel evolves into a finished totality.

By insisting on the rise of the novel, Watt erects its completeness and privilege as a form through relying on and affirming man's as a gender. And by valorizing qualities like completeness (the sentence praising the completeness of the male authors Watt studies completes his own book), Watt winds up endorsing the assumptions of the liberal individualism—integrity, wholeness, and autonomy—that he aligns with the novel. For all his historical savvy, Watt ultimately presents as axiomatic and universal a view of the subject limited by gender (and, other accounts might show, by race, and class). The assumptions behind his history allow ahistorical claims of privilege and perfect unity for individual men.

The sudden break between the novel and romance that Watt highlights in his argument confirms the male privilege tacit in that argument by inserting it in a key feature of formal realism: plot. This unexplained and overdetermined break in Watt's literary history plots a drama of that history Harold Bloom describes as the (male) writer's Oedipal relation to tradition, his break with his strong fathers that is necessary to raise him to their level.22 As feminists have argued, and as Bloom's argument itself admits, that overt break between fathers and sons is actually just another way of cementing male bonds, admitting a writer into the tradition and linking him with his predecessors, who, for Bloom, can only be male.23 For Watt, the break is with a feminine origin, figured by romance, but I might argue that this turn from the woman just marks a moment in the drama Bloom describes, when the son relinquishes his claims on the mother to enter the world of men. What makes Bloom's logic similar to Watt's is that for both the privileged position of the male, and all it represents, depends on the expulsion of woman. In Bloom's case, that expulsion is so

complete that woman is invisible, her position marked only by her place within the Freudian triangle on which his argument builds, the position of the mother. Bloom’s Oedipal scenario completes what I would call Watt’s family romance: a fantasy of origins, initially focusing on the mother, that, Freud claims, the male subject must ultimately overcome through the identification with the father that the Oedipal resolution permits. The role of history in establishing this Oedipal plot is not at all surprising, for Freud himself enlists history in its service; his Moses and Monotheism and Totem and Taboo project onto history the patriarchal precedents of his own theory, establishing a (fantasy of) history that locates the father—and effectively supplants the mother—at its source.

Fredric Jameson, one of literary criticism’s foremost theorists of history, certainly recognizes the complications of referentiality; his notions of history are sophisticated and subtle in the attention he pays to its textuality. Yet, in The Political Unconscious, Jameson argues that although history is available to us only through our interpretations of it, history is not simply a text. Jameson, following Althusser’s revision of Lacan, explains that he

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24 Yet, although Jameson bases his work on recognizing those complications, the gap between word and thing, between textualization and the material, is underplayed in his own use of language. He does admit, in The Political Unconscious, that his own “terminology” “remains unavoidably imprisoned” in categories he wishes to unmask (Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act [1981]. 286; all future references to this book [hereafter abbreviated PU] will appear in the text). Yet Jameson’s argument never fully takes into account just what such imprisonment might mean for it. In an interview about The Political Unconscious, Jameson seems instead almost to assume a control of language: he smooths over the ambiguities and contradictions within his writing by attempting to limit terms to particular and exclusive definitions, as if that were possible—words such as “politics,” “culture,” or “reification” (“Interview: Fredric Jameson,” Diacritics 12 [1982]: 72–91). By examining Jameson’s unexamined, and unacknowledged, play of language, several critics have also emphasized the inscription of Jameson’s argument in the categories it tries to refuse; see Larysa Mykyta on Jameson’s “slippage in terminological usage” (“Jameson’s Utopias,” New Orleans Review 11 [Spring 1984]: 48), and Jerry Aline Flieger on his failure “to provide a clear-cut working definition of his key concept” (“The Prison-House of Ideology: Critic as Inmate,” Diacritics 12 [1982]: 50). The problem is not sloppy thinking on Jameson’s part but that his argument presses him into requiring from language an impossible precision and univocacy in order to reflect the univocal truth supposedly within his theory.

25 Jameson’s use of “History” has come in for criticism from those most willing to foreground history with him. Hayden White argues that Jameson’s Marxist master
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does not at all draw the fashionable conclusion that because history is a text, the ‘referent’ does not exist. . . . [H]istory is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but . . . as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and . . . our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization. (PL 35; see also his discussion on 82)

History, although inaccessible, is the ground of interpretation, Jameson argues, not just another interpretation, not simply another master narrative.26 By “master narrative,” Jameson seems to mean something like what Foucault calls “discourse,” referring to “strong” interpretations (such as psychoanalysis or Marxism) that are distinct from history (as the real) but organize approaches to it.27 Yet in the very act of explicitly setting up this distinction, Jameson implicitly sets it aside for his own Marxist approach. That Marxism, he tells us, provides the only “genuine philosophy of history” (18)—and is for him therefore more than the supreme master narrative; he substitutes it for history itself. Or, rather, what Jameson

narrative of History becomes monolithic, all-inclusive, and imprecise: “the confusion to the reader that is likely to result from the effort to follow Jameson in his many uses of the term ‘history’ will be more than justified” (“Getting out of History,” 4). Terry Eagleton argues against this imprecision too, finding within The Political Unconscious that “the category of history itself may become rapidly drained of meaning”; for Eagleton, however, such imprecision keeps Jameson’s work from being properly Marxist—Jameson’s dictum always to historicize “merely blurs the specificity of Marxism itself, which is not at all to ‘historicize’ . . . but, in a word, to grasp history as structured material struggle” (Eagleton, “Fredric Jameson: The Politics of Style,” Diacritics 12 [1982]: 18, 19).


27Yet his emphasis on such a term as “master narrative” suggests the importance of mastery to Jameson’s own argument (for a detailed discussion of Jameson’s claims to mastery, see Flieger, “The Prison-House,” 48–49). The different assumptions of Jameson’s critics fall into place around the question of mastery: Hayden White and Terry Eagleton imply that Jameson’s dalliance with post-structuralism has undermined his own mastery, in the sense of skill, achievement, and command, as well as certainty (see White’s emphasis on “authority” throughout his essay); in discussing Jameson’s “magisterial periods,” Eagleton’s conclusion that Jameson appears master of what, officially speaking, he is mediator rather wistfully (just) refrains from openly approving the mastery that his frequent modifiers, such as “powerful,” already approve for him (“Fredric Jameson,” 22). Eagleton also makes the point that the referent, and the certainty it implies, has—or ought to have—its place (“Fredric Jameson,” 22). Bennington, Flieger, and Mykyta, on the other hand, imply that Jameson’s very need for mastery undermines his post-structural insights.
calls “History” turns out to have a narrative, that particular narrative of economics which Marx supplies. Jameson claims his Marxism does not just account for the “essential mystery” of the real in “disguised and symbolic” form in the same way other approaches do; rather, it uncovers that essence, uncovers the “repressed and buried reality” of the past. Jameson argues that such reality corresponds to “a single vast unfinished plot,” an “uninterrupted narrative” (19–20) of our steady but painful journey through a fallen world of class conflict and bourgeois individualism to a paradise regained of total collective unity.28

The identity between Jameson’s particular Marxist method and historical reality means that, for him, his method accounts for all of history and subsumes all other only locally effective approaches: “Marxism is here conceived as that ‘untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” (10).29 For Jameson, Marxism occupies the same place as the absent real: the

28Narrative is especially useful for Jameson’s view of history because its very form privileges the evolution and unity Jameson wishes to code into history’s structure: “narrativity not only represents but justifies,” White writes, “by virtue of its universality, a dream of how ideal community might be achieved” (White, “Getting out of History,” 8). That narrative is further unified by the metaphors of Christian teleology that Jameson explicitly enlists to describe that ideal community (PU 70). But Jameson’s canniness in rhetorically unifying his vision of history makes for an emphasis on unity not necessarily shared by other Marxists. For example, Eagleton, who agrees with Jameson that Marxism “is not one ‘method’ among others,” faults him for his handling of that method, his “occasional ‘over-totalising,’ his Hegelian hunt for the master-code which will unlock all others” (“Fredric Jameson,” 17, 15).

29Other critics point out the impossibility of such subsumption. Flieger argues that certain psychoanalytic insights that contradict Jameson’s notion of history are paradoxically essential to his argument nonetheless (“The Prison-House,” 55); she argues too that deconstruction must necessarily refuse cooptation to totalizing theories no matter how much Jameson asserts that a deconstructive approach is only a part of a larger whole. Jameson claims that “I have found it possible without any great inconsistency to respect both the methodological imperative implicit in the concept of totality or totalization, and the quite different attention of a ‘symptomal’ analysis to discontinuities, rifts, actions at a distance, within a merely apparently unified cultural text” (PU 56–57). Flieger argues that you cannot have it both ways; you must either take deconstruction on its own or not at all (“The Prison-House,” 54). For a more recent discussion of the benefits of totalizing and its distinction from totalitarianism, see Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” and subsequent “Discussion” in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (1988), 347–57, especially 358–60.
line of the horizon, the asymptote we can only approach but which
delimits the world. And the way in which it does so, Jameson
argues, allows it to contain all other approaches within its own
totality.

Like Watt's, Jameson's argument values (and his Hegelian Marxism
rests on) notions of unity and evolution, although his treatment
of literary history—the relation of the novel to romance—_attempts
to deny such values or, at least, turn them against the ideological
and consoling purpose they in part serve for arguments like Watt's.
Directly to counteract "denunciations of Hegelian idealistic histo-
riography, of evolutionism, or 'old-fashioned linear history'" (136)
in his treatment of prose forms, Jameson introduces the notion of
the sedimentation of genre (just as he introduces the idea of an
overlay of several modes of production within every social period to
counteract denunciations of the rigid economic totalization of Marxism [94–95]). The novel, he tells us, does not simply succeed ro-
mance, but their relation sketches "a model of the coexistence or
tension between several generic modes or strands" (141); romance is
both canceled and preserved by the novel and, "thus sedimented,
persists into the later, more complex structure" (141).

Yet the theory of sedimentation is difficult to maintain in practice,
as are Jameson's distinctions about the textualization of history.
Jameson actually presents the novel as part of an evolutionary
chain, not simply more complex than romance, absorbing and compi-
ating it, but the very form that is sedimented, the exemplary
form that comes to stand for Jameson's idea of genre. It marks for
Jameson, in fact, "the end of genre" (151), not just that which puts
genre into question but the cumulative form toward which other
prose genres tend. As such, it subsumes those other forms sedi-
mented within it, just as Jameson's Marxism subsumes other meth-
dods. Like Watt's "sudden break," for Jameson both the novel and his
own method grow out of other forms and methods, make use of
them while at once canceling and preserving them, but without
themselves being contaminated or changed.

Like Watt's, Jameson's argument defends its uneasy privilege to
pick and choose this way through recourse to gender biases. His
argument supposedly accounts for and subsumes the perspective of
gender: Jameson argues throughout The Political Unconscious that the
problems of feminism are secondary to and included within those of
Marxism: he notes, for example, that “the existence of marginalized or oppositional cultures,” including women, must be restored “to their proper place in the dialogical system of the social classes” (86; emphasis added). By arguing that class simply subsumes gender, and that class-based analysis will solve its problems, Jameson need not engage with issues of gender, allowing his argument to retain unexamined gender assumptions: his argument’s unexamined valorization of “strong” reading, for example, which he defines as “interpretation proper” (60), continues the appeal to mastery and power that underwrites his claims, and he borrows the phrase “strong reading” directly from Bloom, in whose Oedipal system strength depends on the unacknowledged possession and subjugation of women. Jameson’s appropriation even of what seems the purely formal Greimasian semiotic rectangle relies on another gendered system: Greimas, like Lévi-Strauss—remember Lévi-Strauss’s description of how the exchange of women allows relations among men—initially uses his formula to calculate the permutations of a
system of sexual relations, which remains a buried part of Jameson's use of that formula as well.\textsuperscript{32} That rectangle promotes Jameson's discussion of the class message in Balzac's \textit{La Vieille Fille}, but his discussion is underwritten in terms of "potent" and "impotent" heroes (65), a standard that assumes potency to be an immediately available and commonly valued constant.\textsuperscript{33} Although in his reading here as elsewhere Jameson argues that the sexual struggles Balzac charts are just his displacement of more disturbing class struggles (163), the need for gender assumptions to support his argument maintains gender as an insistent subtext in Jameson's reading. Jameson's very method is fueled by this repressed system of the other, which keeps woman in her "proper place," possessed and exchanged by men, and which ensures male potency—his strength and power.

In \textit{The Political Unconscious}, Jameson explicitly discusses the system of the other and does so in terms of romance. Examining and expanding Northrop Frye's work, he points out that the elements of romance "are all arrayed in binary opposition to one another" (113), especially in terms of the supposedly clear-cut good and evil that structure its world. In an earlier essay, Jameson has shown that such an adversarial scheme is imaginary in the Lacanian sense. It recalls the "primordial rivalry of the mirror stage," in which, Jameson argues, the subject constructs as his adversary, evil and different from him, whomever is like him, threatening his autonomy.\textsuperscript{34} The logic of the imaginary is, Jameson also argues, the crucial logic of romance (\textit{PU}.118). And he aligns romance with women, maintain-


\textsuperscript{33}I might argue that Jameson's privileging of male sexual power is such that the ideological sign or, as Jameson calls it, "seme," for the male necessarily points to "semen"—potency, power—in his argument. Potency, however ironically Balzac aligns it with class, remains for Jameson throughout his discussion a "positive sexual seme" (\textit{PU}.166), and, hence, something he is implicitly for. Even though Jameson criticizes what he calls "ethical criticism"—a system of values particularly structured in terms of the other, of good and bad, for and against (59–60; 114–17)—his argument participates in this system too in ways that his discussion of "dialectical thinking" cannot really take him beyond (286). For more on what Jameson is for and what he is against, see Alice N. Benston, review of \textit{The Political Unconscious}, \textit{Sub-stance} 41 (1983): 97–103.

\textsuperscript{34}Fredric Jameson, "Imaginary and Symbolic in \textit{LACAN}: Marxism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Problem of the Subject," \textit{Yale French Studies} 55/56 (1977): 357; all future references to this essay (hereafter abbreviated "\textit{I&S}") will appear in the text.
ing his characterization of woman as other: he notes that “the most characteristic protagonists of romance” are women, as well as slaves (PU.113), and links the romantic in a work like I Promessi Sposi specifically with “the feminine victim” (PU.143).

The association of the imaginary with wish-fulfillment, romance, and women, and the rhetoric with which Jameson describes it (referring, for example, to texts of the imaginary as “more degraded, and easily commodifiable” than texts of the symbolic level [PU.183]), suggest an implicit hierarchy within Jameson’s explanation of the imaginary, an urge to pass out of it into the symbolic.35 Just as romance leads to the more complex form of the novel, the imaginary points toward the symbolic: “here, once again,” he writes, “the material of the Imaginary serves as a useful contrast by which to define the Symbolic” (“I&S.”368). That contrast is one of opposition: Jameson compares the symbolic’s fixity, for example, to the imaginary’s play (354). Yet part of what is distinctive about Jameson as a critic is his ability to critique his own method: he explicitly recognizes that an adversarial schema that promotes one term over its opposite is “profoundly characteristic of the Imaginary” (“I&S.”350). He recognizes too that his own argument “risk[s] falling again and again” back into the imaginary (“I&S.”384), suggesting the impossibility of reaching the symbolic register it values precisely because of that valorization.

Despite itself Jameson’s argument repeats the mechanism it wishes to avoid: “falling” back, for example, still asserts the very idea of progress that he means to deny, and “risk” implies that Jameson, or anyone, can avoid these dangers (they are just risky but not certain). Jameson unwittingly makes the very missteps he warns against here and throughout his work precisely because he thinks he can avoid them. This confusion is in itself a problem of Jameson’s use of history, his assumptions about the real, for his argument goes on to suggest that he can avoid the problems of the imaginary by emphasizing the real. Despite Lacan’s obscurations of it, Jameson claims, the real can be precisely located: “it is simply History itself” (“I&S.”384). Jameson reintroduces the bedrock of reference, the dialogical third term of “the real,” as a way to resolve

35In this he is only following Lacan, whose writings also, Jane Gallop suggests, “contain an implicit ethical imperative . . . to disrupt the imaginary in order to reach ‘the symbolic’” (Gallop, Reading Lacan [1985], 59).
or circumvent the otherwise endless oscillations that keep us within the imaginary. The referential ground implied in the real, he argues, gives us as subjects a basis for our interpretations and a way out of this double bind.

Other critics, however, find the alignment of the Lacanian real with a referential ground, whether or not immediately available, another imaginary projection. Jane Gallop, working from Jameson's own recognition of the unshakableness of the imaginary, and not letting go of that recognition as he does, suggests that the only provisional and tenuous distinction possible between the imaginary and symbolic has to do precisely with disentangling them from the real. The imaginary is imaginary because it "presents itself as an apprehension of the real"; "the symbolic is a glimpse of the imaginary as imaginary." Gallop argues that "in the imaginary mode, one's understanding of other people is shaped by one's own imagoes. . . . But, in the symbolic register, the subject understands these imagoes as structuring projections." The only escape—if you can call it that—from the imaginary lies in recognizing its inescapability.

In Jameson's vision of history, the belief that one can transcend the imaginary and escape the system of the other means also and primarily that one can elude ideology; Jameson's refusal to classify his method as simply a form of textualization, and his belief in a once and future "collective unity" aware of and outside the limits of class determination (PU. 282–83), taken together point to what is ultimately his understanding of ideology as a false consciousness that can be shed (despite his promise that his book will critique this very notion of false consciousness [12]). The supposed ability of his history to present the real—which becomes the truth—and avoid the self-interest and blindness of ideology is reflected and supported by his literary history: romance becomes the locus of ideology and the novel is somehow (almost) outside or beyond it. The wish-fulfillment of the imaginary, "not yet, according to Freud, the

36 Alice Jardine writes that "this conclusion, if suggestive, is clearly false. For if the Real is anything, it is certainly not history—nor 'reality,' nor a text" (Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity [1985], 122); yet Jardine's own use of "clearly" and "certainly" here keeps her caught in a similar trap; if the real is anything, whatever that might be seems to me neither clear nor certain.
moment of genuine literary or cultural production,” aligns the imaginary with that simpler and degraded form, romance. Such wish-fulfillment also points directly in Jameson’s argument to the ideology which supports it, for he links ideology directly to the imaginary, through Althusser, who defines it as “the imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her real conditions of existence” (181).

That Jameson is caught in the traps he recognizes simply makes his work exemplary of (to me, the best kind of) post-structural criticism; what intrigues me is how he consistently appeals to gender in those moments when he tries to ignore or wish away those traps. Gender becomes crucial to Jameson’s vision of history because it is what seems to guarantee a place outside history’s constraints and the constraints of ideology. He makes the escape from false consciousness—from the realm of romance and the imaginary—seem natural by relying on developmental myths of the subject, myths based on the subjugation and expulsion of women. Jameson’s system, with its structure of origin and evolution, demands a progressive chronology that gets its momentum from discarding and leaving woman behind—demands, that is, fantasies of the mother, whose utility as a point of abandoned origin is implicit throughout his system, as his use of Bloom suggests. She provides, in particular, the point of departure for his literary history. Whereas, Jameson argues, more advanced forms reflect “the genital stage” (142) with its emphasis on the father and realistic social contradictions, romance, as a less developed form, is properly the realm of the mother. Its logic of wish-fulfillment grows out of that regressive “passive and symbiotic relationship of infant to mother” (142), in which the very world around the hero magically reflects him, anticipating his wishes, a realm of “providential or maternal harmony” (143), just as the mother is the world for the infant and seems (or should be) completely attuned to his needs. This is also, Jameson asserts, the realm of the imaginary in Lacan, “an archaic stage in the development of the mature subject” (174), who must pass beyond this pre-Oedipal interlude into Oedipal conflict and identification with the powerful father.39 In his read-

39Jameson introduces a temporal scheme into Lacan’s argument, stringing these inseparable registers into a history, an evolutionary development of the subject that reflects his own assumptions about history. For a critique of “the prevailing tenden-
ing of *La Rabouilleuse*, Jameson designates its subplot of "excessive maternal indulgence" imaginary in this sense (173), suggesting that an overemphasis on the mother mires Phillipe within egotism and the text within wish-fulfillment. And this is also the realm of ideology, that which propels the wish and structures the world in such a way as (to try) to ensure the subject's gratification (181–84). By insistently associating these realms with the mother, Jameson makes leaving them behind seem as natural and proper as growing up—or what our culture teaches as the boy's inevitable turn from mother to father, which allows him to enter the world of men (or, in Jameson's terms, the symbolic).

Yet, as we have seen, Jameson is fully aware of the dynamic of the other, of the way the other is simply a projection of the same and must ultimately collapse back into it. Perhaps he makes the other the mother not just to cast her out, which her cultural construction so helpfully facilitates, but also precisely to collapse with her. The fantasy of the pre-Oedipal mother gives a particular meaning to this sense of collapse, figuring it as harmony and plenitude, the infant merged with what is ultimately its reflection. Such a tacit celebration of plenitude is part and parcel of Jameson's Hegelian Marxism, in which our progress at the same time returns us to a lost state. Jameson indeed explicitly uses the figure of the individual's body completed by one larger than itself to reflect not just the infant's fusion with the mother but "the perfected community" (74), "the lost unity of social life" (226).

This is why Jameson's relation to romance seems so double—why he argues for going beyond it, and at the same time explicitly accepts and even celebrates its similarities to his own system. Both romance and Jameson's history assume "the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced" (110). Because of such assumptions, Jameson can exclaim that "the valorization of romance has much to be said for it" (104) and that its association with Marxism "does not discredit [Marxism] so much as it explains the persistence and vitality of [romance]" (105). The valorization of
a lost unity is the assumption fueling his own method, granting it its charter to catch up and complete other methods by incorporating them into itself. The unspoken assumptions of the gender hierarchy encoded within the romance of the pre-Oedipal mother are meant to underwrite the critic's own privilege, the position of his argument outside ideology. The fantasy of the romantic mother is useful because it supplies a wishful figure for the critic's harmonious coexistence with the dominant system in which he works. Collapse with the mother is desirable because, as Jameson notes about Conrad's heroines, she epitomizes "the relatively ungrateful function of selfless devotion to the male actors" (276)—effacing herself by serving as the reflection of Jameson's argument, which subsumes her as it has subsumed other positions repeatedly, magically neutralizing their problems while preserving their privileges. The mother's seemingly natural effacement and subsumption supposedly clear for him the site of pure totality that she represents, clear it of its regressiveness, of its association with wish, of its status as a delusive trap, all which get purged through her scapegoating. As we have seen, this site of pure totality, for Jameson, is also history or the real. The exemption from ideology that Jameson assumes through this strategy of displacement would make his particular vision of history not just one more textualization but would merge it with the absent ground of the material itself. Unexamined gender assumptions promote access to the real and escape from ideology—the very conditions that The Political Unconscious explicitly argues are impossible. Jameson's history needs gender to sustain its desires and protect it from its own lessons.

Unlike Watt's, Jameson's system explicitly interrogates the assumptions underlying individualism, indicting the belief in the fixed self as a historically bound concept and a conservative tool that undermines history's necessary progress to a classless and communal utopia (PU. 281–99). Although, Jameson argues, we cannot yet fully imagine that utopia, he suggests that the dyad of infant and mother stands for the decentering of the subject necessary for it and, as an image of the fragmentary subject completed by a larger whole, becomes an image of the collective. Such a relation is useful for Jameson's argument, however, because it is not really a relationship at all; the fantasy underlying this particular
dyad sanctions its collapse into the individual—its superficial binary relation masks a consoling illusion, confirming the primacy of the (male) subject.

It is precisely such a dynamic that George Meredith's novels act out. History is as essential for Meredith as it is for Watt and Jameson, for, as Meredith told Carlyle, "Novel-writing is my way of writing history," and by that history Meredith too means evolution. Ground-breaking Meredith scholars, such as Lionel Stevenson and Joseph Warren Beach, among others, have long ago pointed out Meredith's Victorian heritage, the ways the positivistic biological and social evolutionism of Darwin, Comte, and Spencer pervade Meredith's notion of historical progress and are crucial to the philosophical system underlying his work. Meredith's poetry and prose rely on his belief in social evolution, an understanding of which helps to clarify the idiosyncratic narrative commentary of his novels. Like most Victorians, Meredith sees the survival of the fittest as a metaphor for mankind's gradual development into a perfection we have not yet reached.

For Meredith, the development of the individual determines the progress of history within this system of social evolution. The

40Quoted by Lionel Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith: A Biography (1953), 74. For a discussion of Meredith's novels as a way of writing history, see Jane Marcus, "Clio in Calliope: History and Myth in Meredith's Diana of the Crossways," in her Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman (1988), 20–48. Marcus's discussion of history (and mothers) comes to radically different conclusions from my own about Meredith's treatment of women. For an interesting reading of Meredith's romance that I came across while preparing this book for press, and which also reaches conclusions quite different from mine, see Diane Elam, "'We Pray to Be Defended from Her Cleverness': Conjugating Diana of the Crossways," Genre 21 (Summer 1988): 179–201.

41See especially Lionel Stevenson, Darwin among the Poets (1932), 183–236; Joseph Warren Beach, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry (1936), 470–99; and George Macauley Trevelyan, The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith (1906). To assert that Meredith has a philosophical system that readers can reconstruct and paraphrase from his fiction, poetry, essays, and letters does not mean, however, that those writings are merely tracts of this system: what interests me most about Meredith's writing is the way it strays from or contradicts the system of beliefs it explicitly assumes and outlines. For a discussion of the assumptions involved in a theory of evolution as it relates to the form of the novel, see Gillian Beer, Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction (1983). For a reading of how such assumptions motivate Meredith's fiction in particular, see Carolyn Williams, "Natural Selection and Narrative Form in The Egoist," Victorian Studies 27 (1983): 53–79.
primitive self we all have in us is a creature of egoistic desires. With its sensual self-love and desire for self-preservation (what Meredith calls “the gross original” [E.13.1.6]), such egoism seems to work against the progression of the species. But Meredith argues that egoism can be an excellent foundation for our progress if we consider it as the necessary first step in the survival of the fittest.42 Coming to terms with our egoism is a social as well as a physical challenge, consisting in resigning those desires the flesh has for its physical pleasures and preservation, and harnessing the energy for the spiritual progression of the race as a whole; as Meredith has Diana say: “Spirit must brand the flesh, that it may live.”43

Meredith believes that the desire for self-preservation, especially the attempt to deny individual death, to cling to a doomed physical self through the dreams of personal immortality that our culture mistakes for the spiritual, mires men in egoism and slows historical progression. Rebutting the Christian notion of the afterlife, Meredith asks a correspondent: “Which personality is it which endures? I was one man in youth and another man in middle age . . . I have never felt the unity of personality running through my life.”44 For Meredith, the evidence of our senses points to the death of the individual and the continuance of the race: we are left with one rational option, to give up such dreams of self altogether, to trust in the evolution of the species itself for our spiritual fulfillment. Physical law seen through the intellect this way, testifying against the self and to the greater good of the race, is the spiritual ideal to which we tend. Or, as we are told more bluntly by Vernon Whitford, one of the unpretentious athletic students who begin to represent Meredith’s ideal man (as does Gower Woodseer, say, in The Amazing Marriage): “the value to the world of a private ambition I do not clearly understand” (E.13.8.85).

Meredith relates this model of social evolution to the progression of literary history, of romance into novel. Willoughby ironically speaks for Meredith’s philosophy when he pretends to believe in

42He writes, for instance, that “the primitive is not the degenerate: rather is he a sign of the indestructibility of the race, of the ancient energy in removing obstacles to individual growth” (E.14.39.182).
44Stevenson, Ordeal, 350.
community and self-sacrifice, a view that he recognizes is "'novel, I should say, and not the worse for that. We want plain practical dealings between men and women. Usually we go the wrong way to work. And I loathe sentimental rubbish'" (E. 14.47. 303). Meredith's own books are meant to act out the difference between what is "novel" and "sentimental rubbish," community and egoism (in the supposedly unsentimental way a novel like The Egoist details the shifting points of view of a group of characters, for example, rather than sentimentally valorizing a hero, as do the romances that Willoughby reads and after which he patterns himself). Meredith sees romance as a necessary but primitive stage in our literary development, just as egoism is in our social and personal. He has Diana, who writes romances, characteristically overstate his view of romance, stressing that, when experienced at the proper time, its untutored enthusiasm indicates a yearning toward spiritual perfection: "The young who avoid that region escape the title of Fool at the cost of a celestial crown" (DC.1.12). But romance unsucceeded by any (supposedly) higher stage of development remains, for Meredith, a regressive realm of egoistic gratification—of characters like Willoughby or Constance Asper, a "true heroine of romance" (DC. 35.391), who never go beyond its world "of theatrical heroics" (DC.30.360) staged solely to puff the ego, as Willoughby's and Constance's histrionics show. Our desire for fiction, if fed by romance alone, would "idiotiz[e]" us and fiction would be "doomed to extinction" (DC.1.19).

The advent of the novel on the other hand, Meredith implies, will advance our literature and race out of such idiotic artificiality into the socially useful mode of historical philosophy (as Meredith calls his theory of social evolution). In the first chapter of Diana of the Crossways, Meredith discusses the future of the novel, implying that novels up until his own have been contaminated with egoism and romance—or, as an early reviewer interprets him, "Formerly perhaps, when the novel was in its early youth, it might claim to be mainly narrative and romantic. Now it must vindicate its position by being a disguised treatise on mental philosophy."45 As Meredith makes clear throughout his work, and especially in this chapter,

philosophy is what characterizes the novel for him. Only an understanding of human life in terms of (his own) historical philosophy, he implies, can move literature beyond the debased romantic; that understanding "raise[s] the Art in dignity on a level with History" (DC.1.18). Without this evolutionary perspective, even history itself is but "the skeleton map of events" (1.19). Meredith’s own novels attempt to put this philosophic view of history into play. The narrator of Diana of the Crossways is not only a social historian, studying the diaries of the time with the air of a “chronicler” sifting his sources (19.216), but one who, by implication, presents his particular history as a lesson to others: “the example might, one hopes, create a taste” (1.18), the narrator writes, thereby furthering the advancement of the race.

The understanding of history that characterizes the novel distinguishes it from romance because part of the sham of romance is to deny historical progression, to believe in its individual—egoist—importance as a “changeless thing” that “defies time” (35.399). The novel goes beyond such romantic, egoistic delusions of permanence, Meredith suggests, especially by identifying historical progression with the development of the subject: “the brainstuff of fiction is internal history” (1.17). Meredith writes, merging the categories of novel and history into that model of psychological development that has become today equivalent to character.

This emphasis on psychological history within the novel does not mitigate the emphasis on the material that underlies Meredith’s historical vision, however. What especially puts flesh on the skeleton of history for Meredith is woman seen in her materiality. In his novels, such material facts figure as an index to internal history: Diana’s flesh attests to her spirit, her beauty testifies to her wit, and both confirm her virtue (1.2–3). Such symbolization, in which a woman’s body is made the index of her character, is nothing new of course—Charlotte Lennox’s beautiful Arabella demonstrates the same correspondence, as does Dickens’s Little Nell—but this focus on the (woman’s) body as something more than body is interesting all the same because it is so often crucial in attempts to distinguish

Although, as Judith Wilt points out, “philosophy” means so much for Meredith that it becomes ultimately “scarcely definable,” its emphasis on “advancement” (DC.1.17) connects it directly to Meredith’s theory of social evolution (Wilt, The Readable People of George Meredith [1975], 81).
the novel from romance. The supposed transcendence of the novel over the sensuality of romance is made to rest in the woman’s transfigured body precisely because it allows the novel to have it both ways.

For Meredith, the novel, as “the summary of actual Life” (1.17), continues to focus on the facts of life but does so in order to elevate them to a higher purpose, just as his historical vision supposedly translates brute Darwinism into spiritual progression. Romance, on the other hand, Meredith implies, gets mired within the material alone, its “point of original impetus being the grossly material, not at all the spiritual” (1.16). In Meredith’s system, the cloaking of sensuality as spirituality will always be exposed, through the body, as romantic, “rebuked by hideous revelations of the filthy foul; for nature will force her way, and if you try to stifle her by drowning, she comes up, not the fairest part of her uppermost!” (1.16). Meredith’s novels themselves also dwell on the material, but they are supposedly redeemed by the way they point to the ideal: an emphasis on Diana’s sexuality, for instance, is not romantic or sensual because it describes her progression out of egoism. Diana is apparently more realistic—novelistic—than Constance not just because her flaws are clearly evident but because those flaws are symbols of her (necessarily faltering) progression toward an ideal. Yet Meredith’s own shrewd analysis of the way the spiritual can cloak the sensual makes us suspicious of the exemption he gives himself from this dynamic.

The figure of the mulier formosa (the mermaid who is beautiful woman from the waist up, filthy foul below), with which Meredith makes his distinction between the novelistic and romantic, suggests the way the treatment of the self in that distinction depends on assumptions of gender.47 In Diana of the Crossways, the charting of internal history becomes most especially the portrayal of a woman with a history. Meredith suggests that it is precisely Diana’s sexual experience that underwrites her internal history—her psychological development—and makes her worth writing about: “Never should reputation of a woman trail a scent! How true! and true also that the women of waxwork never do; and that the women of happy marriages do not; nor the women of holy nunneries;

47Meredith refers directly to this figure in The Egoist; see vol. 13, ch. 8, p. 86.
nor the women lucky [i.e., undetected] in their arts" (1.8–9). Woman becomes the type and test case for our transformation as a race out of primitive foulness. She must rise above it in herself, work her way through and beyond the primitive desires that are the history of any remarkable woman. Yet, despite the explicit feminism of Meredith’s philosophy—as his “Essay on the Idea of Comedy” outlines, part of the point of his comedy is to show women “moving on an intellectual level with men”—the mulier formosa suggests that the woman never quite leaves this foulness behind; it is always part of her, hidden below. She comes to stand for the material in what Meredith sees as its sexual brutishness, and her depiction allows Meredith to include this sexuality in his novels.48

Her internal development supposedly sets Diana apart from “women of waxwork” by marking her evolution out of romance, out of her artificial romance with Percy Dacier. Diana’s evolution out of romance is crucial in defining her novel as a novel. Although she accuses Redworth of “quixottry” (14.146), she is actually herself a female quixote. She acts out the program I will discuss at length in chapter 2, one in which her education out of romance into the world of the novel is meant to confirm the superiority of the novel over romance; here, that education serves the dual function of confirming Meredith’s theory of evolution as well. For most of the novel, Diana, “after the fashion of the ardently youthful,” is seduced by romance (4.46). She not only writes The Princess Egeria, “a sort of semi-Scudery romance” (18.203), she also acts the romantic heroine Egeria to Dacier.49 When Dacier finally claims sexual favors from Diana in exchange for his political secret, Diana is compelled to glimpse the filthy foul in her relations with him: she has been a “loathsome hypocrite” (31.364) who should have either run away with or broken from him. Her recognition that Dacier prefers the titillation of doing neither “kill[s] her romance” (39.437) and propels her out of it into the clear, plainspoken world of Redworth, in which she relinquishes “her hope of some last romance in life . . . for in him shown not a glimpse” (40.453). Redworth’s

49For further references to Diana as Egeria, see 17.200; 19.218, 222; 28.325.
world is also the world of Meredith's novel, "a different world from the one of her old ambition" (39.433).

Although Diana acts like a romantic woman, a Princess Egeria, Meredith writes that "the right worshipful heroine of Romance was the front-faced female picture [Constance]," who is shallow and unchanging ("Poor Diana was the flecked heroine of Reality" [35.399]). The romantic heroine is fixed in her pose, like a dressmaker's dummy or "lay-figure" (42.476)—trapped in what Dacier calls a "rag-puppet's state of suspension" (31.364). Meredith distinguishes himself as a novelist by distinguishing his characters from just such a puppet theater.50 When struggling to bring together Diana and Redworth, he writes to a friend that Diana "has no puppet-plianty. The truth being that she is a mother of Experience, and gives that dreadful baby suck to brains."51 As he states in the novel: "the woman of flesh refuses plianty when we want it of her, and will not, until it is her good pleasure, be bent to the development called a climax, as the puppet-women, mother of Fiction and darling of the multitude! ever amiably does" (40.448). As the woman of flesh and the mother of experience, the novelist's heroine, the heroine of reality, is also the heroine of history, her flesh standing for its material, and her experience for its evolution.

I want to put aside, for a moment, the intriguing collapse of the feminine with the maternal in Meredith's assumptions to follow through another connection between the self and gender within his system, the way women are connected to the subversion of the coherent self. Meredith suggests that the novel advances over romance by giving up the idea of the fixed self: Meredith uses fakes like Constance to suggest that constant images of the self actually are false. Dacier runs after Diana partly to trap her, to make her

50This metaphor is a useful one, for it also allows him to surpass his novelistic predecessors, especially Thackeray, who was not able to animate his puppets the way Meredith can. Meredith writes: "A great modern writer, of clearest eye and head, now departed, capable in activity of presenting thoughtful women, thinking men, groaned over his puppetry, that he dared not animate them, flesh though they were, with the fires of positive brainstuff. He could have done it, and he is of the departed" (DC.1.18).
conform to this idea of a fixed core of self. His pursuit of her is the "pursuit of the secret of a woman's character" (16.177), of character at all, which he suspects that she does not have: "the feminine half of the world was a confusion and a vexation to his intelligence, characterless; and one woman at least appearing decipherable, he fancied it must be owing to her possession of character, a thing prized the more in women because of his latent doubt of its existence" (28.331–32). Dacier's doubts turn out to be correct; Diana never becomes totally decipherable to him, and Dacier settles for Constance's reassuring outline, her false character. Diana is in-scrutable, changeable—characterless—to Emma and Redworth too, who have trouble accounting for her moods after her break with Dacier. On her entry into the world of the novel, she has become a "daily shifting feminine maze" (40.457). Meredith seems to use this woman's changeableness to present character proper to the novel, character that is unstable and shifting.

Or so critics have argued. Meredith's alignment of women with the subversion of identity has become important in a larger context than his own theoretical system; J. Hillis Miller, arguing from *The Egoist*, suggests too that the breakdown of "a prelinguistic fixed character" is a lesson which "the female protagonist has . . . to teach us men."52 His well-known article, an early treatise on the deconstructive subversion of fixed identity, bases its argument on Clara's changeableness; Miller concludes that novelists project the problems of characterization onto heroines because "the assumption that ontologically substantial characters do exist cannot be detached from the logocentrism or phallogocentrism which underlies it and of which it is a version."53 Applying the Derridean notion of the supplement, Miller argues that men try to make women reflect back a phallic notion of fixity because her lack (of it) threatens and undercuts ontological integrity. They try to cover her lack, to make her into a mirror that reflects their possession, but "the female, that imperfect male, missing one member, introduces the deconstructive absence which means there will always be something left over or something short in this mirror, the per-

petual too little or too much which makes it impossible for the balance ever to come right.” In Miller’s system, just as in Meredith’s, woman seems naturally to figure the breakdown of the fixed, ego-bound self.  

Diana’s loss of ego begins when she leaves behind the world of romance she has inhabited with Dacier and that loss is explicitly figured in terms of breakdown (she takes to her room in nervous collapse) and fragmentation. Her romantic dreams have been for a “benevolent despot” (4.46), but her break with Dacier reveals the dangers of that dream. It hides from her what a realistic appraisal reveals: that he is anything but benevolent. Because his despotism devastates her, she is able to see past his sham, to reach the perspective of the novel. He is “in the dominion of Love a sultan of the bow-string and chopper period, sovereignly endowed to stretch a finger for the scimitared Mesrour to make the erring woman head and trunk with one blow: and away with those remnants!” (35.392). Diana’s propulsion out of romance shatters into fragments her romantic vision of herself. Diana tells Emma of her fractured and incohesive new identity that “there are wounds that cut sharp as the enchanter’s sword, and we don’t know we are in halves till some rough old intimate claps us on the back, merely to ask us how we are! I have to join myself together again, as well as I can. It’s done, dear; but don’t notice the cement’” (39.439). In Meredith’s system, Diana’s break with Dacier marks her triumph as a character, her ability to recognize and relinquish egoist delusion. Her resulting fragmentation seemingly marks the proper novelistic self because it destroys the ego’s despotism that bars spiritual progression. This fragmentation of the self is what Miller

Miller, “Herself against Herself,” 119. Miller elsewhere also ties the subversion of the determinable to anatomy. He writes that “the impossibility of reading” has “consequences, for life and death, since it is inscribed, incorporated, in the bodies of individual human beings and in the body politic of our cultural life and death together” (J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” Critical Inquiry 3 [1977]: 440).

And, as with Jameson, woman thereby provides a vehicle by which to reach a revolutionized community (her proper place within it is left unspecified). Miller suggests resisting the breakdown of identity because it has what he calls “unsettling social implications,” just as Meredith implies that radical social change must follow the historical progress out of the egoist delusions of the self into true community; see Miller, “Herself against Herself,” 121.

A vision shared by the doting Arthur Rhodes and Sullivan Smith, who agree that she is “the Arabian Nights in person” (DC.37.417).
celebrates in *The Egoist* as a way to elude and sabotage despotism; Clara, he argues, "cannot be possessed as an object because she has no objective form."  

Yet rather than providing a way to elude power, such fragmentation might actually be the means of ensuring it. Meredith's insistent imagery of violence done to the body of the woman—the severed head, the wounded flesh—suggests that gender does more than prop up a progressive de-individualization. Diana here quite literally seems to be a scapegoat, providing theories like Meredith's, or Miller's, with a way to preserve the privileges of the systems they criticize while drawing off their evils. Woman not only props up Meredith's vision of evolutionary history but provides a consolation for it, a fantasy of escape (for men) outside the constraints of the loss of the self. For Diana's egoism, shattered by Dacier, gets canceled suddenly and completely when she finally comes together with Redworth and is overwhelmed by "her loss of self in the man" (*DC*.43.483). Diana's loss of self in Redworth, while figuring the breakdown of (her) egoism, actually preserves his. His view of Diana—that "he owned himself incomplete" (*DC*.37.419) and "she would complete him" (*DC*.37.420)—too closely repeats Willoughby's egoist appropriation of Clara: "she completed him" (*E*.13.5.48). Despite Meredith's understanding of her sacrifice, the woman's loss of self remains the reflex of the man's attainment of it.

Such desires for self, condemned in the egoist Willoughby, are ignored or denied when it comes to Redworth; Meredith's novel emphasizes instead the self-effacing, self-sacrificing character of Redworth's love for Diana. In its first chapter, Meredith aligns his novel with *Vanity Fair*, suggesting that Redworth is meant to be an unheroic hero, modeled on Thackeray's Dobbin, whose unassuming character and natural modesty mark him from self-aggrandizing figures like Willoughby. But, as Dorothy Van Ghent has suggested, Willoughby's monstrous egoism is a brilliant authorial ploy, for it seems to make that egoism aberrant rather than a necessary (but also necessarily unspoken) element of the male world he continues to represent, notwithstanding Meredith's deflation of him ("Well, I own it, I do like the idea of living patriarchally,"

57 Miller, "Herself against Herself," 116.
Willoughby says [E.13.11.122]). Meredith’s system accounts for (and excuses) any residual hint of egoism in Redworth by insisting that none of us ever wholly escapes egoism: “‘O self! self! self! are we eternally masking in a domino that reveals your hideous old face when we could be most positive that we had escaped you?’” Diana asks. “Eternally! the desolating answer knelled” (DC.4.47). What matters, Meredith has Diana learn, is that we recognize our egoism and remain at war with it: “at war with ourselves, means the best happiness we can have” (4.48)—a state Redworth supposedly exemplifies, since, from the start, his sense of reason and honor war with and triumph over his desire for Diana. But by making egoism the province of distinctive romantic individuals like Diana or Willoughby, who draw it off from others—from novelistic heroes like Redworth—Meredith tries in part to undo his insight that none can escape it.

Despite the disclaimers within Meredith’s system, the patriarchal Redworth too remains as romantic—and egoistic—as the characters the book condemns, and Redworth’s egoism is to a great degree unironized. The novel even seems to go out of its way at the end to valorize Redworth’s patriarchal power. That power rests on his ability to attract women; the unexpected revelations of his sexual history prompt from other men admiring testimonies to his physical strength that read (to me) almost like unwitting parody: “‘Have you ever boxed with him? Well, he keeps himself in training, I can tell you’” (41.464). Like Whitford (who wins Clara from Willoughby in The Egoist), Redworth is meant to exemplify a true manliness as opposed to Willoughby’s patriarchal sham: strong, silent types, they attract rather than coerce. Diana, for instance, sees Redworth as “a fatal power . . . benevolently overcoming” (40.453) and his “paternal benevolence,” readers are told, actually bespeaks “the loftiest manliness” (43.489). Diana is ultimately glad to give into his superior force. She admits that she “does not stand firmly alone; her story confessed it” (43.486)—a conviction Meredith shares rather than satirizes; several times he instructs a skep-

58Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (1953), 189. Van Ghent discusses Willoughby’s egoism in terms of pre-Oedipal structures, which she finds monstrous rather than consoling: she describes Willoughby as a “fetus in full panoply . . . [a] monster of the womb,” who acts “as if society were but one huge placenta designed for his shelter and growth” (187, 188).
tical correspondent that Diana, like all women, needs “a sturdy mate.” Redworth’s benevolent overpowering of Diana actually supplies just the romantic despotism the novel has earlier critiqued, explaining why, perhaps, the novel goes out of its way to note that there is no hint of romance in Redworth (its distinction of itself from romance becomes explicit and insistent in these final chapters). What Willoughby says about Whitford can be applied to Redworth too: “The story’s a proof that romantic spirits do not furnish the most romantic history”—those who deny romance do (E.14.38.173).

Such moments in his novels suggest that Meredith too is aware that he cannot avoid repeating mistakes, rewriting old plots, despite his recognition and critique of them. In The Egoist, he has Willoughby unwittingly describe his own pathology to Clara, telling her the story of an egoist without (consciously) realizing that the term might apply to himself (13.10.115). Meredith, like Jameson, recognizes the trap of identification that structures any economy of the other, but his fiction remains caught in it nonetheless. Critics have long noted that Meredith’s novels do not elude the romance they deny. Judith Wilt, for instance, observes that, despite Meredith’s attempt to eject it from his novels, “the spirit of romance, like the child who is the father of the man, dominates his outlook all through his career.” And, like Jameson’s, his social evolution depends on woman’s loss of self to allow, but also screen, its contradictions.

Miller’s reading of Meredith repeats woman’s sacrifice to theoretical consistency. In Miller’s reading of The Egoist, his treatment of Clara also has a woman act out his theory while drawing its troubling implications away from his own text: Miller’s celebration of Clara’s fragmentation, for example, does not undercut but enables his own “stable signature” and consistent argument presented as truth. He deploys her as the “deconstructive absence” that

59“To Lady Ulrica Duncombe, Box Hill, Dorking, April 19, 1902,” in Letters, 3: 1438; see also “To Lady Ulrica Duncombe, Box Hill, Dorking, March 31, 1902,” in Letters, 3: 1432.

60Wilt, Readable People, 68.

61Miller, “Herself against Herself,” 122. This critique of Miller seems similar to one that M. H. Abrams makes in “The Deconstructive Angel,” when he writes that Miller “does not entirely and consistently commit himself to the consequences of his premises.” He adds: “He [has] determinate things to say and . . . masterfully
confirms and receives the thrust of his own theory: the body that attests to but draws off the violations of deconstructive fragmentation. His commiseration with her is meant to spare the body of his text, to ward off comparable violence done to the completeness of its argument, while at the same time somehow clearing that argument of the charge of complicity with the phallogocentrism of sense and unity. What I am suggesting here is more than just that the style and structure of Miller’s essay do not self-consciously act out its assumptions because the mutilations of the sign of the woman stand in for that performance; what I want to stress is that, despite their complex understanding of the way we as critics are implicated in what we describe, arguments like Miller’s construct woman precisely in order to assert their own autonomy from the constraints they (often quite happily) note operating on her. Miller is right that heroines have a lesson to teach men, but it seems not to be the one they have learned. The lesson the heroine teaches is, I think, the impossibility of exemption and escape.

Meredith’s theory of history writes itself onto a woman’s body, mutilating her, in order to make history material, visible—to realize not only history but his particular Darwinian vision of its ceaseless battle. “History,” as Jameson puts it, “is what hurts” (PU. 102), supposedly wounding its subjects with such power and immediacy that we drop the fixed selves we hold up like shields against it, forcing us into a collective regrouping for succor and survival. In Meredith’s idiosyncratic reversal of the old lesson that exploit[s] the resources of language to express these things clearly and forcibly, addressing himself to us in the confidence that we, to the degree that we have mastered the constitutive norms of this kind of discourse, will approximate what he means” (M. H. Abrams, “The Deconstructive Angel,” Critical Inquiry 3 [1977]: 437).

Yet, as Jonathan Culler has suggested, “deconstruction isn’t, at least in the work of Derrida and its other most skillful practitioners, some kind of ‘new irrationalism,’ as it is occasionally suggested. Though it reveals ‘irrationalities’ in our systems and theories, it is the most rigorous pursuit of the logic of the text, be it a theoretical or a literary text” (Jonathan Culler, “Semiotics and Deconstruction,” Poetics Today 1 [1979]: 141). Derrida and its other skilled practitioners do foreground the ways their own texts are necessarily marked with irrationalities, however (often on the level of style, through wordplay and metaphor, for example). My complaints are not really with Miller’s attempts at stylistic clarity or logical consistency but with the way he uses the figure of the woman to allow these.

As Barbara Johnson has suggested, the seemingly natural effacement of women has provided the male Yale school with the very slate on which to inscribe its own teaching; see her A World of Difference, 32–41.
ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, which he translates as a moral imperative. Diana's experience is meant to teach that, for the good of the race, the subject should (because he must) give up his individual claims. This is the lesson Diana repeats as if by rote: "'There is nothing the body suffers that the soul may not profit by,'" she states. "'That is Emma's history. With that I sail into the dark; it is my promise of the immortal'" (DC.43.492). Yet the spirit of history brands the flesh by branding the woman's body exclusively. Meredith's novel recounts, but also repeats, the way the world is "very powerful to brand a woman's character" (14.151), marking Diana with her sexual history. Precisely because romance does not register history, the novel suggests, romance is suspect: its shallow unchanging heroines are unmarked, even "featureless, or with the most moderate possible indication of a countenance" (35.400).

That the brutal stigmatization of women is necessary to Meredith's history and form explains the otherwise digressive scene in Diana of the Crossways, in which Andrew Heger admires the dissection of a pig, slaveringly anticipating its consumption. Diana is just such a specimen to be slavered over and consumed (consumption is, in fact, one of the organizing metaphors of Meredith's philosophy as he sets it forth in the first chapter); like this sacrificial animal, Diana is a "fair outstretched white carcass" on which the novelist bids his readers fasten their "intent fond gaze" (8.98), and no amount of ironizing, although this scene tries, can completely distance us as readers from our participation. As we are told time and time again, the world's and Meredith's treatment of Diana, meant to goad her out of self, leaves her a "poor stripped individual" (15.161), "perfectly naked" (11.120). The effect of the woman naked is to point to her gender, to naturalize—through her supposedly natural deficiency—Meredith's practice. Woman's mutilation acts out the logic of her lack; she is branded with her inferiority. (That such essentialism is apotropaic is betrayed by Meredith's revision of Diana's story, having his character hunted and torn apart by her own hounds, who, in the myth, chase Actaeon because he gazed on the goddess's nakedness; the threat of castration destroys Diana here, not Actaeon.)

Moreover, Diana is not merely a passive victim, she is made a

63For other references to Diana as a victim stripped naked to the general gaze, see also Diana of the Crossways 14.147; 27.307; and 34.384.
willing participant in women’s mutilation. Meredith makes it the hallmark of her character that she holds Emma down during surgery, when they “cut and hack” her (26.294), and he has Diana later attest: “I have learnt to admire the men of the knife! No profession equals theirs in self-command and beneficence” (26.301). Such confessions of Diana’s are meant to confirm the powers that mutilate her, especially to attest to the power of the author. Meredith bemoaned what he called the “hideous mutilation” of Diana involved in creating her character and publishing her story, even as he went right on doing so.64 His early reviewers attest to his covert identification with “the men of the knife” by discussing Meredith’s own method of the “clever . . . dissection” of character.65

Confession—the verb used most often in the novel and most often attached to Diana66—is particularly consoling for the novelist and the reader. By hearing Diana’s confession, we seem to be outside of, or aligned with, the forces that elicit it. Reading, the book notes, is a scourge inflicting violence on and purifying what we read (9.111–12; 12.134).67 Such a location seems to guarantee power; it identifies the novel’s treatment of Diana with the same godlike force that the narrator, discussing a society journal, refers to as “Asmodeus lift[ing] a roof, leering hideously” (7.82). But in taking this omniscient position, the novelist aligns himself with those two characters connected in their assumption of godlike majesty, Willoughby, who feels at one with the Powers above watching over him (E.14.43.244), and Redworth, whom Diana comes to see as “infinitely above the physical monarch” (DC.42.477).68 Both are,

64“To Frederick Sandys, Box Hill, November 8, 1884,” in Letters, 2: 753. See also his reference to his own “maimed” state, “To Miss Louisa Lawrence, Box Hill, March 4, 1884,” in Letters, 2: 728. Complicating these images of mutilation is the fact that Meredith’s own wife herself was undergoing surgery as he wrote this novel; see “To Robert Louis Stevenson, Box Hill, Dorking, September 26, 1885,” in Letters, 2: 790.

65See, for example, unsigned review of Diana of the Crossways, from the Illustrated London News, in Williams, Meredith: The Critical Heritage, 269.

66For just some mentions of “confession” in Diana of the Crossways, see 12.131; 14.157; 18.209; 20.232; 22.252; 23.259; 24.275; 282; 26.297; 27.309, 316; 35.391; 48.425.

67The one who is especially scourged is Diana; the blank she presents is scourged by what is written on it. Meredith, for instance, has his wits suggest that “women are a blank to [men]” but “traces of a singular scrawl have been observed when they were held in close proximity to the fire” (DC.28.325).

68For references to Willoughby’s attendant powers, see for example, 13.11.129; and 13.14.157, in The Egoist.
in fact, transfigured into sun-gods. Willoughby's aunts tell us that "'when he was a child he one day mounted a chair, and there he stood in danger, would not let us touch him, because he was taller than we, and we were to gaze... "I am the sun of the house!"'" (E.14.44.256). The narrative irony that deflates Willoughby's pretensions fails to touch Redworth; the novel underwrites and confirms him as "Sol in his glory" or "Sol in his moral grandeur" (as Diana and Emma come to call him [DC.42.477]) by adopting the solar metaphor and infusing its last chapter with it. Willoughby is self-aggrandizing, but the novel itself elevates Redworth. Unlike Willoughby, Redworth is not supposed to be in much danger from such pretensions. He puts Diana's freedom in danger, instead, compelling her within his orbit.

Yet that such powerful entities are imagined as sun-gods—specifically, as young Willoughby's pun tells us, son-gods—returns us to the images of motherhood that underlie such fantasies of sufficiency. The branding of the body, Diana states, is Emma's history—Emma, Diana's surrogate mother, her "madre" she calls her (2.32)—which reminds us that the woman of flesh is specifically a mother in Meredith's system. Diana's loss of self is figured in terms of rebirth; her break from Dacier and romance returns her quite literally to Emma's breast, where she embodies the figure for social evolution she supplies us with at the beginning of the novel, of the present world "in maternal travail of a soberer, a brighter-eyed... distinguishable as the sickness and writhings of our egoism to cast its first slough" (1.12). The casting out of egoism is associated with the maternal flesh, the pangs of childbirth in which she gives birth to herself in a new form, one that has sloughed off the self. Like egoistic romance ("The gross original"), the mother, Meredith writes at the end of the novel, is the exemplary "gross material substance" (43.493) that can sometimes lead to great poetry: she is at any rate the material out of which he constructs his novel and on which he constructs his system. The romantic spirit in Meredith's work is not so much the father as the mother of the man. (The need for such bedrock makes clear the continuing attraction of the roman à clef for Meredith; to safeguard the assumptions of this novel, for example, by gesturing outside it to the history of Caroline Norton, that famous mother.)
The stripping down to essentialism that supports his history reveals more than just the feminine; it reveals the maternal, the feminine engaged in its supposedly most natural function. Diana’s secret, which Dacier chases (not really a secret since her name announces it), turns out to be not so much lunar changefulness revealing a lack of character as her ability to reflect the sun. Redworth, seeing “how charged with mystery her features were,” unlocks that mystery by realizing that she is like another kind of reflective virgin blank, “a Madonna on an old black Spanish canvas” (9.104). Redworth clinches Diana’s maternal status and his own identification with the gods by literally impregnating her at the end of the novel: the culmination of the history of this novel is the very power over Diana to transform her into a mother.

Meredith assumes the mother’s traditional identity as the exemplary nonself that nurtures and re-enforces the infant self, especially the son’s. Meredith is aware of the relationships of such a picture of motherhood to the egoism he criticizes; he describes Willoughby’s egoism as his “tender infant Self” (E.14.29.50) and aligns what one critic calls Willoughby’s “mother fixation” with the realm of romance (Willoughby’s mother, for example, seconds him in asking Laetitia Dale to be “his Egeria” [13.441]). The romantic behavior Willoughby expects from an Egeria is very much the osmosis proper between mother and infant; she is to be his “balsamic bath” (13.14.158), “Love’s very bosom” (13.11.129): “she was expected to worship him and uphold him for whatsoever he might be, without any estimation of qualities” (13.11.129). Willoughby’s complaint about Clara is that “she would not, though a purer poetry is little imaginable, reduce herself to ashes, or incense, or essence, in honour of him, and so, by love’s transmutation, literally be the man she was to marry” (13.6.54). In Diana of the Crossways, however, such self-immolating mother-love is no longer romantic, but natural and legitimating; one critic describes Emma’s love for Diana by referring to the highly idealized scene of Diana’s rebirth at Emma’s breast in correspondingly ideal terms: “it is the feeling of being thoroughly understood, even to every vibration of voice, every shade of word, and, stronger still, the certainty that

69Stevenson, Ordeal, 228.
here there will always be found rest, trust, and love till the world’s end.” In what Freud sanctioned as the proper development of the mother-daughter relation, such love, however, rather than reflecting Diana’s egoism as it does Willoughby’s, makes her into just such a reflector herself, allows her own rebirth out of egoism so that she stops acting like a man, turns away from her love for the mother that surfaces here (for this scene is highly erotic as well), deflecting it into love for the father and his representatives, becoming a mirror for a man’s ego.

Perhaps Meredith can have it both ways, rely on assumptions he elsewhere criticizes, not just because that criticism has seemed to purge those assumptions of danger but also because, in this novel, they have gone underground. Willoughby, for part of the book, has a mother, however shadowy, who is useful in that context because she can be deemed romantic and blamed for his ills, as well as the ills of the novel. But there are no actual mothers in Diana of the Crossways; Emma is not really Diana’s mother, about whom readers hear practically nothing at all, and the book ends with only the discreetest of possible hints that Diana herself is to become one. In this novel, Meredith counts on what has become almost a feminist truism, namely, that the mother is unrepresentable, resisting and eluding systems of power—perhaps most familiar in our time in contemporary French feminist discussions of her. If mothers in their unrepresentability supposedly escape dominance, so do the selves they reflect, and it is this fantasy that allows Meredith’s novel to maintain his history while exempting itself from it. By covertly celebrating the romantic mother, Meredith’s system opens up a loophole permitting access to the very realm of freedom it condemns as Diana’s romance: in “the kingdom composed of the shattered romance of life . . . she was free and safe. Nothing touched her there” (DC.40.450).

Diana of the Crossways emphasizes throughout that mothers are meant to supply a place free and safe, outside and at the start of history. Emma, in the selfless maternity that calls Diana back to life, literally nourishes her with her own food, coaxing her to eat by telling her “‘pledge me’ is a noble saying, when you think of humanity’s original hunger for the whole. It is there our civilized

70 Unsigned review of Diana of the Crossways, in Williams, Meredith: The Critical Heritage, 269.
commenced, and I am particularly fond of hearing the call. It is grandly historic’” (36.412). “Emma fed her as a child,” Meredith writes, “and nature sucked for life” (36.412). It is here, in the realm of nature, just before and overseeing the grandly historic advent of culture, that Meredith places the mother. Her utility for his system is that, although she leads to history, she provides the realm of freedom that also evades it. Diana claims that it is “‘before the era of the Nursery,’” when we are still with our mothers, that we find “‘Liberty to grow; independence is the key of the secret’” (28.328).

The mother’s connection with a realm of liberty outside history—a natural realm—is central to Meredith’s philosophical system, which certain poems, such as the suggestively titled “The Empty Purse,” and critics responding to them, such as Stevenson and Trevelyan, make clear. Meredith’s figure for what compels and controls the evolutionary progress of history is Nature herself, which throughout his writing he calls the great and “Mighty Mother.” Rather than question Mother Nature (which only makes her appear “terrible and inscrutable”), man must cheerfully trust in her unceasing protection and nurturance, for “thus alone can man face death without dread,” when he sees that personal death is not an end but simply a step in the grand progression nature oversees. In undoing the finality of death, Meredith seems to be countering the personal salvation of Christianity with a mystical self-loss, sustained by another fantasy of the pre-Oedipal, the mother overwhelming and subsuming the self. Yet Stevenson points out that Meredith embraces a Carlylean notion of heroism, a cult of the favored few who, paradoxically, find individual distinction through “divine self-forgetfulness”—who, by trusting in the mother, find immortality. The proper relation with Mother Nature actually grants a privileged individualism that rises above death. The effect of Meredith’s system is ultimately the same as that which he rebuts: just as for most of the other Victorians, his reaction against the desire for personal immortality is perhaps so sustained and bitter because he could not completely relinquish the desire himself.

71Stevenson, Darwin, 205.
72Stevenson, Darwin, 218.
74Stevenson, Darwin, 230.
The life-giving privilege is ultimately not supplied by the mother anyway in Meredith's system but by the spirit of which she turns out to be only the vessel: "The sole path to God is through communion with Earth," Meredith notes in his poetry, and "by being 'true to the mother with whom we are' we may be 'worthy of Him who afar beckons us on to a brighter birth.'"75 Meredith's heroes are this spirit's chosen sons. This family triangle supports an arbitrary assumption of power by grounding it in supposedly natural fact. Mother-love spotlights and completes the chosen son; her complete abasement to him makes him the equal of the powerful father by granting him similar prerogatives. An emphasis on the mother suggests a route to power that sidesteps direct confrontation with it, and this might have been what Oscar Wilde had in mind when he wrote of Meredith that "whatever he is, he is not a realist. Or rather I would say that he is a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father. By deliberate choice he has made himself a romanticist."76 But Meredith does not just cast himself in the role of chosen son. Meredith identifies with the totality of power, merging with it first of all by taking on the mother's role: throughout his writing of Diana of the Crossways, he insistently identifies himself as her mother.77 Meredith takes over the father's place too. Diana is a mother at the end because she is pregnant with Meredith's creation—she is the site on which his pen inscribes the story he tells—and this creation is precisely the fantasy of self-creation, the belief that the self can be autonomous from the system that creates it.

The desire encoded here is that the power of writing is power over the history it describes because it eludes the end of the history of the self—it grants power over death. Diana of the Crossways begins precisely with Meredith granting the diarists (with whose writing he identifies his novel) "power to cancel our Burial Service"

75Stevenson, Darwin, 220.
76Stevenson, Ordeal, 273.
77See, for example, his wish for the time "when I am delivered of this Diana," "To Miss Louisa Lawrence, Box Hill, March 4, 1884," in Letters, 2: 727; his desire to "have her out of me," "To Robert Louis Stevenson, Box Hill, March 24, 1884," in Letters, 2: 731; his hope "to finish with the delivery," "To Mrs. Leslie Stephen, Box Hill, March 24, 1884," in Letters, 2: 732; and his claim that "my Diana is out of hand, leaving her mother rather inanimate," "To Robert Louis Stevenson, Box Hill, Dorking, October 10, 1884," in Letters, 2: 747.
(1.9). Meredith's favorite metaphor for egoism in Diana of the Crossways—a haunting ghost points to a desire for the self to last after death. The mother is specifically the means to such power because her traditional role associates her with the creation and extinction of the self. Indeed, Meredith's emphasis on cheerfully choosing the mother's law in order to surmount it is the very mechanism of consolation that Freud, in his essay "The Theme of the Three Caskets," suggests that the mother provides. Man prefers, in desperate hope of "wishful transformation," to choose a disguised form of what he cannot avoid, the last mother, "the Mother Earth who receives him." The utility of romance and the mother in my reading is that they show the way novels and patriarchy construct history precisely in order to (try to) put an end to it.

78Diana of the Crossways repeatedly discusses the way people are "haunted" by self (see 4.47, 48; 19.214), which adds another level of meaning to the ghost Redworth sees in the churchyard (8.96; it is really Diana, and her identification with such ghosts also identifies her with egoism).