

# **In Between: Cultures and Languages in Transition**



# In Between: Cultures and Languages in Transition

Selected Proceedings of the 23rd Southeast  
Conference on Foreign Languages,  
Literatures, and Film

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*Edited by*

Margit Grieb, Yves-Antoine Clemmen,  
and Will Lehman



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*In Between: Cultures and Languages in Transition*  
(Selected Proceedings of the 23rd Southeast Conference on  
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# Preface

The following essays represent a selection of papers presented at the Southeast Conference on Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Film (SCFLLF) held on March 2<sup>nd</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 on the campus of Stetson University in Celebration, Florida. The conference was supported by a generous grant from the University of South Florida and received administrative and organizational support from Stetson University and the Department of World Languages at the University of South Florida. For over three decades the conference, which convenes biennially, has been and continues to be a showcase for scholarship in the Humanities with a special emphasis on non-English language area studies. In 2018, at the 23<sup>rd</sup> SCFLLF, fifty-three national and international scholars presented their research on linguistics, literature, film, culture, and language pedagogy. The essays we selected to showcase all probe and comment on the “space/time/issue between” in aesthetic or linguistic productions in a variety of cultures. We have organized these contributions in three parts entitled: Part I: Between Fiction and “Reality,” Part II: Between Continuity and Transformation, and Part III: Between Conformity and Resistance.

## Part I: Between Fiction and “Reality”

In his essay “Historical Veracity and the Novel,” Ippokratis Kantzios reflects on the complex relationship between historicity and fictionality in historical novels. By using as points of reference genre works by widely diverse authors (G. Flaubert, M. Renault, M. Yourcenar, C. McCullough), Kantzios identifies some of the elements that are present in high-quality historical novels and also some of the traits found in less successful efforts. He contends that, although mastery and understanding of the factual background is a *sine qua non*, without their creator’s special gift to transform words into tools for human self-awareness, historical novels, even when accurate and veracious, remain futile attempts at recovering an unrecoverable past.

Frédéric Levéziel, while at UCLA, discovered newspaper clippings from 1937 that relay *La Grande Illusion’s* critical and box office reception. These articles further reiterated the dichotomy between the firsthand experience of World War I veterans and the fictional depiction of the well-run POW camp in the film. This

discovery led Levéziel to question the support that the film received from former French POWs when it was first released in 1937, and the ways in which it impacted the legacy of these prisoners during the interwar period. In “La grande illusion des oubliés de la Grande Guerre,” he connects historical film studies with reception studies. Furthermore, he argues that *La Grande Illusion* played an indisputable role in modifying the collective representation of French POWs in Germany. For a long time, the general public in France considered the prisoners to be living symbols of defeat; they were not a part of the mythology of the war hero (the *poilu*). But by being heavily involved in the promotion of the film, the POWs were able to change their image in the French collective memory.

With “In Search of the Yellow Brick Road: Existential Despair and Survival in *Jean Gentil* (2010) and *Sand Dollars* (2014) by Laura Amelia Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas,” Adriana Tolentino and Thomas Di Salvo examine the role of two recent films, *Sand Dollars* and *Jean Gentil*, in redeeming the state of recent Dominican filmmaking and in addressing its quest for authenticity. The authors propose that Laura Amelia Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas’ film aesthetics articulates a vision of the Dominican Republic that speaks of its own search for identity just as much as that of their protagonists. Therefore, this study compares how Jean and Noelí, the two protagonists of the films referenced in the title, embark on a quest to fulfill their immediate needs and their dreams of an improved existence, which often forces them to face their moral and existential values. Through contrasting both lead characters, a young prostitute and a Haitian immigrant, marginal subjects within Dominican society, they shed light on overlooked issues in the island as well as in its cinema, such as the remains of a colonial past and of unresolved racial class and gender tensions. The paradisiacal Dominican landscape, Noelí’s home, to which Jean migrates, and Europe, where Noelí dreams of starting a new life, both appear like attractive, brightly lit Yellow Brick Roads, but neither can guarantee the two islanders’ success in attaining their dream of leading a dignified lifestyle.

In her essay “Biographies biaisées en Belgique: ces histoires de vie sont des rencontres risquées entre réel et imaginaire,” Jeannine Paque argues that whether they are a passing fad or simply a matter of evolution, biographies are written differently when the authors are themselves writers and/or artists. These “stories of lives” differ both from fictional and historical documentary endeavors. A third path where those two approaches fuse and get confused consists of taking

a biographical subject matter to shape it in an impressionist way. The resulting text is dual as it exposes the studied character and reveals the one who researches and writes.

Marie-Line Brunet's "La Double Vague des migrants" examines the fourth documentary of Alice Diop, *On call* (2016), an acclaimed young director who received a *César* in 2017. Brunet identifies the aim of Diop's documentary as two-fold; firstly, with this intimate spotlighting, the director's gesture consists of producing, as she likes to say, a cinematic emotion. Mainly filmed in close-up shots, the refugees find themselves at the center of the frame and receive all of the film's attention. Diop opts for a calm and slow montage, interspersed with fades to black and ellipses that also allow her to insist on the slowness of the administrative procedures, but without ever wanting to aesthetically mark her presence; secondly, Alice Diop underscores her belonging to a new and upcoming cinematic movement, the "Double Wave." Through her artistic expression, Diop provides a critical reflection on the refugee crisis with resolutely personal camera angles.

Rosana Díaz-Zambrana's essay, entitled "Paisajes, silencios y orfandad: Los fracasos del viaje en el cine chileno contemporáneo," examines the Chilean films *Paseo* (Sergio Castro, 2009) and *De jueves a domingo* (Dominga Sotomayor, 2012) as symptomatic examples of an experimental narrative in which disorientation, silence and the symbolic use of the landscape are strategically manipulated to suggest unresolved historical traumas. These films combine the genres of the *bildungsroman* and the road movie to depict – through the perspective of a struggling young subject – the crisis of the traditional patriarchal family in post dictatorial Chile.

In his essay "Amélie Nothomb, *Riquet à la Houppé* et la langue des contes ou comment construire la réalité par le langage" Yves-Antoine Clemmen focuses on Amélie Nothomb, a Belgian writer who has built a pantheon of characters reflecting and deflecting many biographical realities. Thus, she has become herself a character in her books and for her public. His essay analyzes, through the character constructions in her 2016 novel *Riquet à la Houppé*, how Nothomb bases all access to reality on the way one handles language. In the process she also both mystifies and demystifies the literary process as a place that multiplies the facets of reality, where magic signifies and, as such, is part of the real.

## Part II: Between Continuity and Transformation

Martin Luther is arguably one of the most influential thinkers in German and European history. Stephan K. Schindler's essay "Martin Luther's Legacy in German Culture" examines this controversial figure in the wake of a recent 500-year anniversary celebration in Germany and abroad. Luther created a religious schism in Europe by questioning the sole authority of the Catholic Church and the Pope, which led to a devastating political event in Germany, the 30-Years War. His theological fierceness is matched by his innovative spirit that continues to shape German culture: he invented today's Modern High German, he utilized and advanced modern communication technologies, and he created the intellectual foundation for the German Enlightenment. However, Luther was also an early participant in negative traits associated with German culture: Anti-Semitism and blind trust in the authority of the state.

Carlos Andrés Bertoglio's "El Fútbol y la Desaparición de la Muerte en Argentina 78: Una Vuelta sobre la Banalidad del Mal en *Dos Veces Junio* de Martín Kohan" deals with the process of normalization and transformation of the horrific and the unthinkable into the methodical under the last Argentine dictatorship, as reflected in Martín Kohan's novel *Dos veces junio*. Following Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, Bertoglio explores the role of soccer, the World Cup in 1978, and even the seemingly weakest links in the official chain of power as necessary cogs in a precise machinery of death.

Petre Ene's "Aspectos Mariológicos en la *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*" explores the role of Celestina, the central character in Fernando de Rojas' novel as a point of balance in society, realizing an antagonistic comparison to the Virgin Mary's role in the medieval world. Celestina is a greedy person and teacher of pandering who has great experience in manipulating others to act in her favor, especially in those situations which involved the characters' sexual desire and lust. Acting in the narrative similar to a gray eminence, the protagonist stands out as the keeper of social appearances. Through her mediation, she becomes as important as the Virgin Mary for the community. However, Celestina's ministry is at the opposite pole of Mary's. Her decisive role in matters of love and honor, as well as in erotic consummation, makes Celestina a "Mother" in her environment, which is at the very core of the city's sinful social life.

Yohann C. Ripert, in “Between Adopting and Adapting: The Case of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s French,” questions the role of French in postcolonial countries. In West Africa in particular, scholars have presented French as a living contradiction between the surrender to French as a neocolonial language of the state and the vindication of identity politics and nationalism in indigenous idioms. The question has thus been framed in an easy periodization: “for” or “against.” Reading often-ignored documents that relate to Léopold Sédar Senghor’s decried praise of the French language, Ripert challenges the assumption that the choice has to be binary – especially for Senghor. Rather, he argues that Senghor refuses to choose, and displays a desire to negotiate the framing constantly in an effort to implement what he called “cultural independence.” Focusing on two events where French was both “adopted” and “adapted,” the author shows that Senghor opened a “space between” languages inviting intellectual production. Analyzing a speech on “Francophonie as Culture,” Ripert first reads the project as an instantiation, not of a political institution plagued by French neocolonialism, but of a collective creation driven by incessant dialogues, and secondly returns to the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Dakar in 1966, to show what such creation meant, in practice.

Heike Scharm’s “Transcorporeality and Depolarization: Spanish Contemporary Sci-Fi for a Time of Crisis” offers a closer look at how Spanish Sci-Fi questions and undermines Western binary models of thought in order to overcome the endemic polarization of societies today. Specifically, the short story “El rebaño” (The Flock), by César Mallorquí, provides a representative contemporary example of ecological thought in Sci-Fi. Mallorquí’s flock refers to the coexistence of all that existed and continues to “coexist” in a postapocalyptic world, including dogs, sheep, humans, and technology, all the while showing their interconnectiveness and interdependence. Scharm uses Tim Morton’s works *Ecology after Nature* (2009) and *The Ecological Thought* (2010) to guide her close reading of Mallorquí’s story. She reveals a metaphorical representation of the postcartesian and postkantian tendencies at the base of ecological thought, as little by little, dualisms, such as the human/non-human or natural/non-natural, are identified, questioned, and finally rendered inconsequential from the narrative perspective.

Frédérique Chevillot’s essay “Hélène Cixous Défie l’Augure de l’Entre-deux” explores the ways in which Hélène Cixous’ most recent

publication, *Défions l'augure (Let Us Defy Augury)* (2018) reclaims for itself Hamlet's impulse to go to battle in spite of inauspicious premonitions. For Cixous, as for Montaigne from whom Shakespeare draws inspiration, to live is to always remain ready to die: "The readiness is all" (*Défions*, 64). Cixous' eighty-fifth publication to date offers a poetic, sophisticated, at times exceedingly enigmatic, text that brings together the dead of the ancient as well as recent past – literary figures from antiquity to modern times, and/or personal friends long deceased and/or recently lost – and the living loved ones, albeit always already dying. In addition, the notion of a promontory from which one is to offer hospitality to the writing of the book (of life) emerges, throughout the text, as the unique and vital space for defying the augury and learning to let go of life while living.

Language education in heritage language speakers (HLs) is an important area of empirical research. In "Acquisition and Maintenance of Spanish Subjunctive in Heritage Language Speakers" Estrella Rodríguez looks at bilingual speakers who, in the state of Florida, have been educated in English, but grew up with a minority language at home. Her project reports on four research studies that examine subjunctive mood oral production throughout the years in children and adults with Spanish as heritage language. Rodríguez chose the subjunctive, because even if it is complex, it is very much used in Romance languages like Spanish. In her analysis she confirms recent findings on the preservation of early-acquired grammatical knowledge by HLs. Though not entirely native-like, most HLs display subjunctive in obligatory and salient contexts, but not necessarily in sentences with optional mood choice. Rodríguez recommends continued access to literacy in the heritage language and different modalities of instruction to expand functional bilingualism in HLs.

### **Part III: Between Conformity and Resistance**

In "Translating a Canadian Feminist Killjoy in Quebec: Towards a (Re)definition of Feminist Intervention Strategies" Madeleine Stratford and Laurent Aussant observe that in recent years, scholars have been questioning the relevancy of so-called "feminist strategies" in contemporary translation practice, arguing they are too specific to Canadian experimental writing from the 1980's, and based on a clean-cut dichotomy between men and women (see Wallmach 2006; Castro 2009 and 2013; Martín 2014; von Flotow 2006 and 2009). Others claim

that translation strategies applied by feminists are not as different or unique as translators have lead us to believe (Massardier-Kenney, 1997; Wallmach 2006). Stratford and Aussant's practice-based case-study addresses existing lack of empirical investigation by analysing Madeleine Stratford's French translation of Erin Wunker's *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy* (BookThug, 2016), focusing on gender-conscious interventions related to the translation of non-gender-specific nouns and pronouns. After outlining the theoretical background and methodology of their study, the authors compare strategies adopted at different stages of the translation and investigate how Stratford's feelings toward gender-related content may have influenced her translation choices. Ultimately, they aim at redefining the nature of what could be termed a gender-conscious "third-wave feminist" approach, both from a theoretical and a practical perspective.

Yanina Becco's essay "El Teatro Español y sus Estrategias de Representación y Producción de Sentido en el Estado Censor" analyzes the reaction of playwrights to the political and institutional crisis that affected Spain during the last military dictatorship, and how they struggled to develop their careers, while avoiding censorship. Following James Scott's theory of "public transcript" and "hidden transcript" she explores which tools the playwrights resort to in order to avoid censorship and to get published.

"Paradoxical Ironic Meanings and Stylistic Techniques in the *Poemas humanos* of César Vallejo (1892-1938): A Reading of *altura y pelos*," by Cheryll Saylor Javaherian, looks at César Vallejo's third major work, *Poemas humanos* (ca. 1931-37), a collection of poems that embodies the existential contradictions of the human condition from both individual and collective viewpoints. The shaping principle in the portrayal of these contradictions is thematic and stylistic irony. In *Poemas humanos*, five basic types of thematic irony are at play: comic, satiric, paradoxical, tragic, and nihilistic. Javaherian's study demonstrates irony's importance not only as a salient characteristic of the writings of this seminal Latin American poet, but concomitantly, as a major stylistic and thematic element of the literary vanguardism of Latin America in the early twentieth century. To this end, Javaherian offers an elucidation of the ironic theme and style of "altura y pelos." As do many other texts of *Poemas humanos*, this poem poses a contradiction between the lyric speaker as both victimizer and victim and incorporates other-directed and self-deprecatative satiric irony. It closes, however, on a paradoxical-ironic note, with reader sympathy generated for neither the victim nor the victimizer.

Marianela Rivera points out in “Women’s Poetry from Western Sahara: Hispanic-African Voices of Revolution and Freedom” that few academic studies focus on Hispanic texts of African origin that have emerged in an effort to defend the victims of a still latent colonialism. At the same time, little is known about the Hispanic-African women writers who use literature as a tool to resist foreign invaders and to reject the oblivion of the world powers. Such is the case with contemporary authors from Western Sahara, Spain’s last colony. The region continues to be the center of an endless political and territorial controversy with Morocco. As a result, Sahrawi women’s poetry has emerged as a tool to express a collective message beyond gender, geographical, and linguistic boundaries. These poems convey the strength of voices that vividly describe the anguish of Sahrawi mothers, their love for the land, the frustration of living in exile, and the authors’ identity as women, as Muslims, and as Sahrawi nationals. Rivera’s study focuses specifically on the work of the poets Fatima Galia M. Salem and Salka Embarek, whose work has become representative of the still ongoing fight for Western Sahara’s independence.

In my essay “*Viel passiert* – Wim Wenders’ Return to the Rheinland” I look at Wim Wenders’ film *BAP – Viel passiert*, a musical portrait of his long-term friend Wolfgang Niedecken, the lead singer and figure head of the Cologne-based band BAP, embedded in a filmic commentary on post-war German cultural history. In BAP and its songs, sung exclusively in the Cologne dialect and with locally-themed texts, Wenders sees a possibility to explore his own problematic relationship to his *Heimat* Germany, in both personal and professional terms. I analyze Wenders’ film as an attempt to frame, visually and aurally, the regional, cultural, geopolitical, and linguistic space of the Rheinland as rebellious and subversive, and a space with which he identifies. While his generation, especially the New German Cinema movement to which he belonged, often criticized Germany as a problematic nation state due to its troubled 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, Wenders views the regional, especially the separatist Rhineland region, as an anti-nationalist identification screen. Produced in 2001, while this film functions ostensibly as a retrospective of Niedecken’s musical career, it concurrently presents a commentary on Wenders’ own résumé, a personal reckoning motivated by the inauguration of a new millennium.

In the final essay of this collection, “El grafiti en América Latina: Hacia una cosmética de la violencia. Dos estudios de caso; Medellín,

Colombia y Rio de Janeiro, Brasil,” Javier Alvarez-Jaimes looks at how graffiti, increasingly accepted as an intrinsic cultural practice of the urban environment, is becoming a sophisticated product that flirts with a mercantilist logic and seems to gradually move away from its subversive and clandestine origins, incorporating itself into the local environment as a consumer product. It has become more part of the decoration than a call to reflection. However, behind what appears to be a submission to the rules imposed by the laws of consumption, a mimesis is revealed in which the resistance to the discourse of power is camouflaged behind an aesthetic of the public. Through this operation, public art acquires the role of agent in the social processes that take place within the city. Taking as reference the cases of Medellin in Colombia and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, Alvarez-Jaimes explores recent developments of graffiti in Latin America and its transition from a clandestine, illegal and predominantly political position to a legitimate practice, sanctioned institutionally, and perceived as inherent to the urban space.

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## **Part I: Between Fiction and Reality**



## Historical Veracity and the Novel

*Ippokratis Kantzios*

*Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, written by Edmund Morris, a Pulitzer-prize winner and mainstream historian, caused considerable bewilderment when it appeared in the bookstores in 1999. The author had complete access to the President, his papers, friends, and family, and one would have expected a solid, traditional volume on Ronald Reagan, his vision, accomplishments and failures. The book, however, chose to tell his story not through the employment of the usual “objective” third person, but partially through the eyes of an imaginary observer, a fictional contemporary of young “Dutch” Reagan. In fact, this fictional narrator is given a name, detailed family background, school history and friends. In about 1968, the character becomes Morris himself and resumes the narrative. Such an unorthodox approach was controversial, of course, but the author defended it as intellectually justifiable, because it allowed the reader not only to see the world the way Reagan saw it, but also with an immediacy that could have not been achieved otherwise. “All I have done in the way of fictionalizing myself (I never fictionalize him),” says Morris in a *Newsweek* interview, “is make myself Reagan’s contemporary, in effect extending that closeness of observation back to the earlier stages of his life, in order to render it as vividly and honestly as I do the presidency.”<sup>1</sup>

Are we to call Morris’ book historiography or historical novel? The author’s intention was, undoubtedly, the former; technically speaking, however, he may have produced the latter. For the paradoxical interplay between historicity and fictionality is at the heart of historical novel. Indeed, if we search for a strict definition, we will probably be unsuccessful, since this genre, as many others, is a range, not a point. One could start, of course, with the rudimentary notion that a historical novel is a novel the plot of which is placed in the past and the characters of which are real, historical figures entangled in real, historical situations. The relationship between historicity and fictionality, however, varies widely. There are novels that have no plot other

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with E. Thomas and J. Meacham in *Newsweek*, October 4, 1999, p. 22.

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than the unfolding of episodes in a historical personage's life, as observed by an imagined bystander. At the other extreme, some works describe relatable events in the lives of purely fictional characters, their only claim to the category of historical fiction being that they are set in the past.

The tension between historicity and fictionality is resolved, to some extent, by the genre's very term, which consists of two elements, "historical" and "novel," by definition incompatible with each other, since the former claims the world of veracity, while the latter abides in the world of imagination. But where does the emphasis fall? Let us keep in mind that the term is "historical novel" and not "novelistic history," and thus one could reasonably argue that it is the noun that carries the major attribution rather than the epithet. A good historical novel, therefore, must be, above all, a good piece of literature.

But since this particular kind of novel is also "historical," we must recognize that certain of the author's liberties are restrained: the basic facts of real, known events cannot be distorted. With the plot set in the past and often using as characters real historical figures, the author must abide by what we know about them as personalities and also about the surrounding events and socio-cultural milieu. But the past is not wholly known to us; in fact the remoter the period the plot is set in, the more lacuna-riddled it is. For example, many of the details regarding daily life, customs, celebrations, and interpersonal relationships in the classical world still elude us. There are historical events of major importance about which we know either little or almost nothing. Yet, unlike the historian, who must frequently make sense of the past from fragmentary evidence, the reader of a historical novel expects to be presented with a complete and satisfying set of causes and effects leading to some convincing resolution or shedding light on the motivation of the characters. A historical novelist must have a thorough understanding of the period on which he embarks with his plot. And he must also, by using known information, come up with some kind of verdict towards his protagonists. The novelist has the right to bring in imaginary episodes, but these must be compatible with the traits of the character, established through known facts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Merritt 2014: "I have no problem with the idea of an author reinventing Abraham Lincoln as a vampire hunter, for example, as long as the fantasy is grounded in a knowledge of his biography and the book is well-written... Far more irritating to me are films such as *Becoming Jane*, which seemed so taken with the idea of turning Jane Austen into one of her own romantic heroines

Still, the historical novelist has abundance of space to exercise his own originality and creativity. One could think here of the case, itself ancient, of the Greek tragedians, who worked with familiar mythological plots. Although all three greats used the same saga of the House of Atreus, a reading of Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* and the two Electra plays by Sophocles and Euripides makes it clear that an established plot outline is not an impediment to a riveting retelling of the story. In fact, the fresh perception of events, characters and relationships revitalizes an old and—perhaps—tired plot, as do the embedded surprises and unexpected twists. In a moving short story by Jorge Luis Borges, the voice of the narrator reveals a world of sadness and alienation; the more he speaks the more we feel for him. It is only at the very end that we realize, through a brief apostrophe,<sup>3</sup> that the narrator is none other than the Minotaur in his endless wanderings within his prison, the Labyrinth. Out of a simple situation, Borges generates a nuanced discourse on solitude, showing at the same time that the constraints of a well-defined mythological frame should not be used as an excuse for poor literature.

By the same token, the use of an intricate and rousing set of historical events as plot outline does not necessarily guarantee a satisfying novel. Of this reality we need to mention just one example, Gustave Flaubert's *Salambo*. Although Flaubert is arguably the best novelist of the 19th century, his *Salambo*, set in ancient Carthage and spiced with human sacrifices and other lurid orientaling details, is not exactly a masterpiece, as it evokes a forced and artificial environment. In other words, there is no single prescription for authenticity: an author may present his setting either in painstakingly elaborate detail or with a few deft atmospheric strokes. Mary Renault's recreations of ancient Greece are good examples of the latter approach.<sup>4</sup> So sure is her "feel" for the world she delves into that even some facts disproved by time do not invalidate its sense of authenticity.<sup>5</sup> At the extreme end of this

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that it brushed aside even the most basic understanding of Austen's life and circumstances."

<sup>3</sup> -¿Lo crearás, Ariadna? —dijo Tesco—. El minotauro apenas se defendió.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1956 and 1981 she published eight widely read novels, such as *The Last of the Wine* (1956), *The Persian Boy* (1972), and *The Praise Singer* (1978).

<sup>5</sup> Renault's depiction, e.g., of Alexander, has been received with skepticism, as she tends to heroicize and romanticize his traits. Her portrayal of Demosthenes is even more problematic.

## 6 Between Fiction and Reality

spectrum lies, of course, the careless author, as of cheap historical romances, who simply has not done his homework. Fortunately, most writers are more responsible. On the other hand, one of the commonest excesses of the more conscientious authors is a tendency to pedantry. One is often tempted to suspect that these writers are hypersensitive about not being professional historians or classicists and are determined to convince the world of their knowledge of the subject-matter by bombarding the reader with tedious information. An example of this phenomenon is Colleen McCullough, a prolific and successful writer of many kinds of novel, among them the “Masters of Rome” series, which consists of *The First Man in Rome* (1990), *Grass Crown* (1991), *Fortune’s Favorites* (1993), *Caesar’s Women* (1996), and *Caesar* (1998). These volumes comprise a saga which opens in about 120 B.C.E. and ends with Caesar’s second expedition to Britain, his conquest of the Gauls, and the battle of Pharsalus in 48 B.C.E. McCullough, we must concede, has chosen the complicated world of Roman politics, and some effort might legitimately be expected on the *mise-en-scène*. But another author could perhaps accomplish this within the natural flow of the events. Details which cannot be integrated in this manner are probably superfluous. And as if the burdening of the reader with excessive data is not sufficient, in *The First Man in Rome* McCullough provides a ninety-four-page glossary, a fifteen-page pronunciation guide to Roman masculine names, an Author’s Note, maps, portraits of Romans, and so forth. One gets the impression that the author is setting out to create a textbook for a class on Roman politics. Clearly for McCullough the emphasis falls not upon the word “novel” but the word “historical.” Let me quote from her Author’s Note:

For those with sufficient background to be skeptical about my treatment of the relationship between Marius and Sulla during those early years...I suggest you consult the Julilla entry in the Glossary...To check the facts about Martha the Syrian’s prophecies concerning Gaius Marius, see Martha in the Glossary. And if you doubt the ancients knew what vintage wines were, look up wine... No bibliography is appended...any bibliography would run to many pages. One hundred and eighty volumes of the Loeb Classical Library would be but a small beginning... My scholarship will be obvious enough to those qualified to judge, without a bibliography. (McCullough 783-84)

For McCullough the priority is apparently that she not be accused of historical inaccuracies. It would be indeed paradoxical for the reader to complain about too much veracity, but one would have preferred that equal emphasis fall upon the novel as a piece of craftsmanship.

In fact, craftsmanship is what has caused some critics to complain that the great days of historical novel, that is, the 19th century,<sup>6</sup> have passed and now we live in the age of forgettable bestsellers. This complaint is an exaggeration, I think, for there were plenty of less-than-admirable novels then as well. In the twentieth century, important novelists from Thomas Mann to Thomas Pynchon and Norman Mailer have tried their hand at the historical novel with fine results.<sup>7</sup> Some of the best, set in ancient Rome, are the masterful Claudius novels by classicist Robert Graves,<sup>8</sup> who understood his chosen world and its denizens so profoundly that he had no need to throw gratuitous detail at readers. One could also think of Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, a fictional autobiography purportedly written by the Roman emperor Hadrian to his seventeen-year-old grandson Marcus Aurelius, who eventually becomes an emperor himself. Yourcenar reconstructs Hadrian's complex, introspective character, his cultivated mind, the political events of his dramatic career and his thirty years of travel over the Roman Empire, then at its greatest extent. But it is not so much the excitement of events that concern the author as the depths of an extraordinary human character revealed by his "own" words and reflections. Yourcenar lets us, in Robert Morris' manner, see the world in the way Hadrian sees it. There have been complaints about the book's lack of drama, dialogue, and "scenes," and this is true, especially if we compare it with the conventional action-packed historical novels that surround us. Yet its voice is authentic: it is the sensitive, philosophical and intimate discourse of an educated emperor, known to us through the testimony of his contemporaries as a man of thought rather than action. In a strange way, *Memoirs of Hadrian*, through its introspective and serene coloration, brings to mind the qualities of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. In the Author's Note, at the end of her book, Yourcenar does mention the major sources she used for her reconstruction of Hadrian; yet she never forgets that she is a novelist:

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<sup>6</sup> One could think, e.g., of Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Honoré Balzac, among many others.

<sup>7</sup> Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) was mainly responsible for his Nobel Prize in literature (1929). Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997) and Mailer's *Ancient Evenings* (1983) became important landmarks in their authors' careers. Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), a mystery story set in the 14<sup>th</sup> century achieved international renown.

<sup>8</sup> *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, both published in 1934.

## 8 Between Fiction and Reality

History has its rules, though they are not always followed even by professional historians; poetry too has its laws. The two are not necessarily irreconcilable. The perspectives chosen for this narrative made necessary some rearrangements of detail, together with certain simplifications or modifications intended to eliminate repetitions, lagging, or confusion which only didactic explanation could have dispelled. It was important that these adjustments should in no way change the spirit or the significance of the incident or fact in question. (Yourcenar 312)

Concisely, Yourcenar gives us the fundamentals for a sound footing in this genre.

Since this paper began with a reference to a non-historical novel, let it end in a similar way. In 1984, Odysseus Elytis, Nobel laureate and one of the most important modern Greek poets, published a collection of reconstructions of Sappho. Instead of merely translating the fragmentary verses (the common academic practice), Elytis filled in the blanks by using his sensibility and imagination, being, as he liked to say, her distant cousin. The new, complete poems, although not exactly by Sappho, contain much Sappho, albeit refashioned and reimagined. The historical novel functions not much differently: relying on the always incomplete evidence, it brings a past world to life by illuminating aspects of the human condition which elude the historian. Mastery and understanding of the factual background is a *sine qua non* for the novelist. But without the special gift that transforms words into tools for human self-awareness, historical novels, even when accurate and veracious, remain futile attempts at recovering an unrecoverable past.

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