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A MIRROR OF LITERATURE: THE HISTORIAN AS A CHARACTER IN A NOVEL

Abstract

This article analyses three novels of exceptional content and form, written at the end of the 20th century by Graham Swift, Penelope Lively, and William H. Gass, where the main characters are historians.

The historians' portraits that emerge in the novels *Waterland*, *Moon Tiger* and *The Tunnel* are complicated, melodramatic personalities, rebellious figures bearing a complex fate who try to come to terms with the outcomes of their traumas. They live through the crisis resulting from their traumas and the change of time regimes, reflect on the meaning of the historian's work, the value of history to people and society, and try to find an answer to the question of whether the ability to tell stories will help them deal with the scars history leaves behind as it breaks people's destinies.

How should historians read and interpret these novels? Can the imagery of a scholar examining the past or lecturing on history created in the pages of a novel tell us something new about how today's society understands the work done by a historian? How can such portraits of a historian (historians) help us in our analysis of society's self-awareness, its experience of time, and historical sensibility?

This article seeks answers to the questions raised above.

Keywords : Graham Swift, Penelope Lively, William H. Gass, novel, history, postmodernism, historical metafiction, historical imagination



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INTRODUCTION

When, where, and how do the interests of historians and writers thinking about the past, history and memory correlate? What are the possible forms of coexistence and interaction between history and literature? Of what use are writers to historians, and vice versa?

These are not new questions.¹ Writers very often receive the first impulse to delve into a historic event, phenomenon, process or figure by reading historians' texts. Historians, meanwhile, are interested in how images of the past are created in fictional literature, what kinds of innovative story-telling strategies writers experiment with, and how history, history's relationship with man and society, and the interaction of memory and forgetting are captured in the literary imagination.

When talking about what makes writers' texts important to them in the 21st century, historians usually list several things:

1. A literary text can play the role of a historical source.²
2. A literary text can serve as a means of introducing themes that are important, in terms of memory and history, into the public space.³

¹ Here are a few examples of how these questions are deliberated. The writer's point of view: Gillian Polack, *History and Fiction: Writers, their Research, Words and Stories* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016). The point of view of a historian who has also experimented with the novelist's craft: Richard Slotkin, "Fiction for the Purposes of History," *Rethinking History* 9, n. 2/3 (2005): 221–236. A summary of discussions unfolding in historiography: Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2009).

² Many historians learned how to read fictional literature as potential sources. The concept of a writer's text as an important history source was entrenched by representatives of The Annales School, who formulated and realised a programme intent on modernising the discipline of history. With the emergence of different trajectories in history in the second half of the 20th century, spanning the history of mentalities, everyday life, emotional, microhistories, new cultural history, and others, the potential for using fictional literature in historical research expanded significantly. There are many attempts at talking about these opportunities. For example, *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence*, ed. Tom Dunne (Cork: Cork University Press, 1987).

³ This ability of writers is expressed very distinctly in the erosion of democracy, the rise of populism, and the entrenchment of chauvinistic moods in society or under the conditions of living under a dictatorship. The historical experiences of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Central East European countries that were made satellites of the USSR, and other European countries that lived through authoritarianism and totalitarianism in the 20th century, show that where historians living in societies that are not free face obstacles in talking about certain historical issues, they can sometimes be successfully overcome by novelists, whose texts thereby fundamentally enhance the historical culture of a particular society. For example: in the Soviet Union the Holocaust theme was masked by claims of Nazi terror against "peaceful Soviet citizens". The latter "uncomfortable" theme was returned to the public space at the time by writers. One such writer breaking censorship barriers was Anatoly Kuznetsov (1929–1979), who in his documentary novel *Babi Yar* spoke out about the massacre at Babyn Jar near Kyiv (a severely censored version of this work was published in the magazine *Yunost'* 8–10 (1966)).

3. A literary text can be a way of speaking out about difficult existential questions relating to the painful experiences of people and society, and the traumas that linger thereafter.⁴
4. A literary text can convey new, original, and valuable interpretations of historical events or processes and the activities of historical figures.⁵
5. A literary text can be written as an unconventional history work (for instance, reconstructing the inner world of historical figures, exploring the destinies of people left on the margins of the great historical narratives, modelling scenarios for the end of history, counterfactual or future history, etc.).⁶

When examining the zones where historians' and writers' interests overlap, we find that novels are an important source, particularly those that talk about how a person exploring the past relates to a painful personal, family or social history, create portraits of a historian's or a community of historians' character, or call into question the meaning of the historian's profession or the historian's craft.

What kind of portrait of a historian (historians) emerges in the mirror of contemporary literature? Can the imagery of a scholar examining the past or lecturing on history created in the pages of a novel tell us something new about how today's society understands the work done by a historian? How can such portraits of a historian (historians) help us in our analysis of society's self-awareness, its experience of time and historical sensibility?

In this article, I shall be analysing three novels written by the European and American authors Graham Swift, Penelope Lively and William H. Gass. The

⁴ Some important questions that writers often formulate and resolve more actively and effectively than historians relate to the traumatic experiences of people and societies: How do we live now after having experienced evil? How can we calm our memory and talk about our own (and others') painful experiences? How can we avoid discussing the question seeking to level out historical suffering that ultimately leads nowhere – "Which one of us suffered more?" See: Krzysztof Pomian, „Pamięć podzielona: miejsca pamięci w Europie jako zjawisko polityczne i kulturowe,” ENRS, August 20, 2011, <https://enrs.eu/article/pamiec-podzielona-miejsca-pamieci-w-europie-jako-zjawisko-polityczne-i-kulturowe>.

⁵ New opportunities open up writers' attempts to look at how history unfolds from the perspective of more than just one historical figure; their determination to delve into the inner motivations of historical (anti)heroes and the masterful imitation of their "internal monologues"; the use of the micronarrative technique. For more on this, see: Peter Burke, "History of events and the revival of narrative," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 283–300.

⁶ The phenomenon of unconventional history is discussed in the journal *History and Theory* 41, N. 4 (2002), Theme Issue 41: „Unconventional History” and in Ewa Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne: refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2006). At present, a great deal of attention is being paid to research of the end of history, and counterfactual history as a way of combining historical thinking and imagination as a mode of unconventional history. Some examples are: Catherine Gallagher, *Telling it Like it Wasn't. The Counterfactual Imagination in History and Fiction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018); *The Ends of History: Questioning the Stakes of Historical Reason*, ed. Amy Swiffen and Joshua Nichols (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012).

main characters in these novels of high artistic quality are historians (male and female) dealing with complicated existential and professional problems.

By analysing these works, in this article I shall seek to uncover how Graham Swift, Penelope Lively and William H. Gass handle the questions of humanity's relationship with history, the knowing of history, and the meaning and significance of the historian's craft.

Why does this article examine these three novels by Swift, Lively and Gass?

1. In terms of their content and form, these three works are considered probably the most interesting novels written at the end of the 20th century whose main character is a historian.⁷
2. The historian's profession in these novels is a fundamental condition determining the hero or anti-hero's actions and destiny.
3. The profession of the main characters discussed in this article, the stance taken by these historians and their decisions allow the novel authors to bring up several important questions: the value of history and its meaning from a societal perspective; the historian facing up to personal trauma and trauma experienced by society; the fate of a female historian in the male-dominated academic environment; a rebellious scholar and the pressure they face from the historians' community representing the official discourse; the process of rethinking and recreating history at the point of fusion of history and story.
4. The novels by Swift, Lively and Gass return us to the problem of how history and the historian's craft were understood in light of the challenges of postmodernity?
5. These novels are still not being discussed at much length or analysed by historians despite the enormous attention they have received from readers and literature researchers.

Interestingly, there have already been attempts at looking into the mirror of literature and seeing the portraits of historians being created by writers. Jerome de Groot was the first to analyse these portraits, but he worked mostly with texts attributed to popular culture.⁸ It was this study by Jerome de Groot that prompted me to continue the work he started.⁹

What are the theoretical assumptions of the research conducted in this article?

The research conducted in this article rests on studies by historians and literature researchers in which discussions centre on how we should define the relationship between *history* and story,¹⁰ that look at the qualities of the modern

⁷ Possible future directions for research of novels where historians are the main characters are outlined in the last part of this article: "Post scriptum. What other novels should be discussed?"

⁸ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 49–57.

⁹ The first attempt at this research: Aurimas Švedas, "Hard to Be a God: Historians in the Face of Evil," *Theory of History at Work*, September 05, 2023, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/15324>.

¹⁰ A review of discussions searching for answers to the questions "What is history – a science or an art?" and "How is an interaction between history and literature possible?" is given here: *The Writing of History. Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert H. Canary,

and post-modern historical novel, discuss the phenomenon of historiographic metafiction which does not fit into the framework of a historical novel, and analyse how works of fiction broaden the opportunities for our relationship with the past and create contemporary forms of historical culture.¹¹ From the enormous body of texts, in this case we should distinguish the innovative books by literary theorist Lynda Hutcheon and historian Jerome de Groot.¹²

Jerome de Groot presented a broad panorama of the development of the historical novel while also showing that it is important for historians in the 21st century to show interest not so much in the historical novels still being written in the Walter Scott paradigm as it is to explore the content and form of innovative novels in which tremendous attention is given to themes like the past, history and memory, while also embracing bold artistic experimentation. The latter kind of text, according to historian John Demos, “now comprises a kind of interdisciplinary borderland, to which historians, novelists and literature scholars have come in growing numbers”.¹³

Meanwhile, Hutcheon suggested the umbrella term “historiographic metafiction” and gave recommendations on how a new kind of (historical) novel should be interpreted: “There seems to be a new desire to think historically, and to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually”.¹⁴

Equally important for the research conducted in this article are texts dedicated to the phenomenon of historical imagination by historians Robin George Collingwood, Hayden White, and Marek Woźniak. Collingwood considers the historical imagination a unique, self-sufficient, self-defining and endeavouring way of

Henry Kozicki (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006); Ann Curthoys and John Docker, “The Boundaries of History and Fiction,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory*, ed. Nancy Partner, Sarah Foot (London: Sage, 2013), 202–220; Beverley C. Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2009).

¹¹ There are many texts exploring these questions. We shall limit ourselves to the most important considerations: David Cowart, *History and the Contemporary Novel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989); Elisabeth Wesseling, *Writing History As a Prophet: Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1991); Frederick M. Holmes, *The Historical Imagination: Postmodernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction* (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1997); David W. Price, *History Made, History Imagined: Contemporary Literature, Poiesis, and the Past* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction (Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society)* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Krzysztof Pomian, “Historia i fikcja,” in Krzysztof Pomian, *Historia: nauka wobec pamięci* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2006), 10–48; Alan Robinson, *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹² Lynda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York, London: Routledge, 1988); Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (New York, London: Routledge, 2010).

¹³ John Demos, “Afterword: Notes From, and About, the History/Fiction Borderland,” *Rethinking History* 9, n. 2/3 (2005): 329.

¹⁴ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 88.

thinking. In his opinion, it is thanks to the historical imagination, extending beyond the sphere of obviousness and convention (let's say, brute facts), that the past becomes the object of our thinking and knowing.¹⁵ White formulated a much more radical concept for historical imagination, saying that connections between events in the past do not exist, they are merely created while the historian is engaged in thought.¹⁶ This scholar considered the imagination one of the most important ways of experiencing the world and urged historians to reject binary oppositions (intellect vs imagination), while at the same time searching for opportunities for interaction between these different things.¹⁷ Collingwood and White held the historical imagination as a fundamental instrument that both writers and historians had to use. Additionally, White taught historians to think about historical texts as texts.

Woźniak suggested a new concept of the historical imagination: it is an expression of a specific culture's interaction with its own past.¹⁸ This kind of approach allows the reader to look at the historical imagination as a society's wilful ability to (re)create past worlds and to impart meaning to them. This idea is important to my research, because it allows the interpretation of historians' and writers' activities as equally important efforts to create bonds between the past, present, and future dimensions through narratives. Meanwhile, the qualities of the time regime we are currently living in, which are explored in François Hartog's and Aleida Assmann's books, allow for a better understanding of why the bonds between the past, present, and future weaken and dissolve, which in turn becomes a problem for historians and writers alike.¹⁹

The review of historiography presented above suggests that both historians and writers are oftentimes united by the same thing —a historical event and attempts to gauge its meaning.²⁰ In the 21st century, the fundamental similarities of history and fiction, and their coexistence alongside one another, is no longer considered an existential challenge to researchers of the past. Much more could be added. Many historians acknowledge the right of writers to reflect

¹⁵ Robin George Collingwood, "Inaugural: Rough Notes," in *The Principles of History and Other Writings*, ed. William Herbert Dray and Willem Johanis van der Dussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143–169.

¹⁶ Hayden White developed this idea in many of his articles and most important books: Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987); Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Domańska suggests this interpretation of White's intentions: Ewa Domańska, "Hayden White: Beyond Irony," *History and Theory* 37 (2) (1998): 173–181.

¹⁸ Marek Woźniak, *Przeszłość jako przedmiot konstrukcji. O roli wyobraźni w badaniach historycznych* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2010).

¹⁹ François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Aleida Assmann, *Is Time out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020).

²⁰ Ursula Brumm, "Thoughts on History and the Novel," *Comparative Literature Studies* 6, n. 3 (1969): 321.

on history, to analyse, interpret, and narrate it, thereby enriching historical culture in society.

When discussing the importance of history to human identity, knowledge of the past, the ways individual and collective memory mechanisms operate, and the principles of creating narratives about the past, writers from the modern and especially postmodern epochs become equal partners in the dialogue with historians. At this point, we may recall the thesis by Dutch literature researcher Ernst van Alpen about “the astounding similarities between the philosophy and theory of history and processes that have come to light in postmodern literature”.²¹

If truth be told, these similarities should come as no surprise. Both writers and historians are often after the same thing: to seek out in history certain signs, orientation markers, or guidelines that, being interrelated in a narrative, create a meaningful image of existence.

The historians, as the main characters in the novels *Waterland*, *Moon Tiger*, and *The Tunnel*, also engage in this search for meaning.

TELLING STORIES AS SALVATION: *WATERLAND* (1983)

British writer Graham Swift likes to tell stories about people that are suffering. In almost all of the works by this author, the protagonist is someone who is no longer young, who, upon looking back on their life, tries to come to an understanding of their behaviour and feelings, and searches for meaning. The impulse for this kind of self-awareness is a tragic event that changes, or sometimes even totally destroys, the character’s life.

Swift talks about what mattered and still matters to both modern and postmodern literature: a person’s efforts to understand their place in the flow of time, traumatic experience, and the attempts made to come to terms with it, a dialectic of memory and imagination, and the paradoxical links between history and story.

With the publication of the novel *Waterland* (1983), Swift became established as a leader in his generation of writers, starting to be called a living classic. The book won numerous awards (the *Guardian* Prize for Fiction, the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, Premio Grinzane Cavour, etc.) and, as researchers of Swift’s work have claimed, he should have won the Booker Prize, too. In fact, *Waterland* was short-listed, but the writer won this award for his 1996 novel *Last Orders*.

Critics welcomed *Waterland* enthusiastically not just in the United Kingdom, but in the US as well. A film based on the novel was released in 1992 (directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal), with the main roles being played by Jeremy Irons, Sinéad Cusack, and Ethan Hawke.

All these circumstances mean that the novel has been discussed and examined in detail by researchers of literature, philosophy, and even psychology and history

²¹ Ernst van Alpen, “The Performativity of Histories: Graham Swift’s *Waterland* as a Theory of History,” in *The Point of Theory: Practices of Culture Analysis*, ed. Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer, Jonathan Culler (New York: Continuum, 1994), 205.

theory. Literature theorist Linda Hutcheon described *Waterland* as an exemplary work attributable to the historiographical metafiction subgenre.²²

Works that are considered historiographical metafiction remind the reader that history, existing as a continual and collective process, is accessible to us first of all due to its stories. And that these stories are created by people remembering, interpreting, and representing events from a particular point of view.

The novel begins with an epigraph from an encyclopaedia presenting a definition of the concept of “history”: 1. inquiry, investigation; 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story. This epigraph defines the semantic field of the novel and determines its structure. In the novel, each meaning of the word “history” reveals a multitude of different variants, a range in shades of meaning and colour, which when combined create a dense narrational fabric.

History takes on numerous forms in Swift’s novel: there is the Grand History of significant historical events that the teacher Tom Crick talks about in his lessons; the history of the Fenland – a lowlands region in East England, an area more than 1,200 square miles in size that was reclaimed from the sea; the history of the Crick family and the teacher, one of its members, and also the history of the Atkinson family. These histories not only interweave, but often also speak over, overwhelm, and correct one another, creating a complex picture of reality.

The author’s gaze constantly wanders from great historical events to the things that happen in the personal space of the little man. For instance, at the end of the first chapter it is mentioned that in July, 1943 “something floated down the Leem, struck the ironwork of the sluice and, tugged by the eddies, continued to knock and scrape against it till morning”.²³ At dawn it became apparent that this was the corpse of the young man Freddie Parr. Reading the novel, we find out not only what happened, but also what this death means. As literature researcher Karen Hewitt summarised, in time it becomes clear that Parr’s death “was related to the destinies of three local families, to the geography of the lowlands where the accident happened, with the several-century-long history of the Fenland’s economic development, with the incessant thoughts that had possessed one participant in World War I, with the Americans’ behaviour during World War II, with the strange forms human love can assume, with the way of life of the eels, with a history teacher’s retirement that will only occur after thirty years, and with the fear that teenagers feel over the possibility of nuclear war”.²⁴

²² Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 15.

²³ Graham Swift, *Waterland* (New York: Scribner, 2019), 6.

²⁴ Karen Hewitt’s article „O Greme Svfite: sovremennyy anglijskiy romanist. Sem'i, navazhdeniya i „Poslednie rasporyazheniya” [About Graham Swift: contemporary English novelist. Families, obsessions and Last Orders] was printed in the journal *Inostrannaya literature* (1998, No. 1). It is available online at website „Gor'kiy”: Kh'yuit, Karen, „O Greme Svfite: sovremennyy anglijskiy romanist. Sem'i, navazhdeniya i „Poslednie rasporyazheniya”, Gor'kiy, Accessed September 20, 2024, <https://magazines.gorky.media/inostran/1998/1/o-greme-svfite-sovremennyyj-anglijskiy-romanist-semi-navazhdeniya-i-poslednie-rasporyazheniya.html>.

Swift's novel is constructed as a series of lessons given in the final weeks of a teacher's working life (before he goes into retirement). In these lessons, Crick talks about Fenland and the Atkinson family, the French Revolution, England's development from the late 18th to the 20th centuries, technology and its impact on people's lives, incest and murder. He starts to tell these stories upon realising that during regular lessons, his students are simply dying of boredom. As mentioned, the stories Crick tells appear at first glance to be a chaotic mix of recollections, impressions and facts, however, they gradually coalesce into one whole, revealing the complex, non-linear interaction of everything. In the novel, artifice is historicised, while history is enshrouded in imagination. This act is performed both by the novel's author and the book's main character, Tom Crick.

What does the teacher hope to achieve by telling these stories, if not to arouse his class from their emotional and intellectual freeze, this class who cares little for the past yet is terrified by the threat of nuclear war? First of all, this is necessary for Crick himself. He needs to tell these stories so that he may survive.

By talking about and sharing his memories, the teacher urges his students to search for meaning, constantly reminding them that each person's actions are associated with responsibility. Crick speaks openly about the horrible mistakes he made in his youth, which ended in tragedy: Freddie Parr's death, his brother Dick's suicide in the presence of Tom and their father; his beloved Mary's decision to abort Tom's child – the abortion almost cost the young woman her life and ends up being the reason for her sterility. After the loss of their aborted child, the young couple become swept up in the feeling that "it's all nothing", they lose sight of the future, and Tom ends up retreating into the past (in history lessons), while Mary, having lost interest in life, seems to drop out of the flow of time. Living a quiet life and trying not to break down completely, one day the past still ends up painfully confronting two people: Mary kidnaps a baby near a shopping centre and brings it home, and then leaves her husband. Tom meanwhile, observing his life collapse around him, as usual, is forced to ask the fundamental question, "Why?"

Tom Crick takes a risk in choosing the painful path of searching for answers. He could well drown in the waters he is muddying up. However, the teacher, having no other choice, dives in and starts to tell strange, tragicomic, and sometimes terrifying stories.

In trying to find answers to the question "Why did these bad things happen in Mary's and my life?", he reconsiders the history of his native land, the United Kingdom, Europe, and the world. Crick tries to understand the past, to reconstruct it, to "put it in order", while also fully aware of the dramaticism of history and his own limits in being able to understand it.

In his lessons, the teacher not only talks about various things but also sets out his own philosophical view on history. Crick tells his students (and us) that there is no infinite progress, that history swings like a pendulum, so that a period of growth will necessarily be followed by regress. History, which afflicts people with much pain, is not linear—it has no order or logic. This idea is reflected in the novel's structure, too. Even though the narrative is constructed highlighting three

themes – the history of Fenland; the events of the 1940s (the love story between Tom and his future wife Mary, Parr’s murder and Mary’s abortion); the broken existence of Tom and Mary’s family life in the 1980s – *Waterland* does not follow a strict chronology, so the past and present interweave, changing places. Episodes—both historical and fictional—are invented, then suddenly break off, merge and fuse into one another.

When exploring how he understands history, in his lessons Crick mentions only one name of a researcher of the past, that being Thomas Carlyle. This is not an accidental reference, as we can find some things in common between the teacher’s and this Scottish philosopher’s views. Carlyle had a sceptical view of the prevailing optimistic notions in 19th-century historiography regarding the potential for knowing history.

If we evaluate what Crick tells his students in his lessons, and how, we can say that: he gives them a unique lesson in patience and wisdom, teaches them humility in the face of blind nature which sweeps away the fruit of man’s and history’s labour, erasing events and names from memory. On the other hand, the history teacher also gets his students used to the idea that they too will most likely lose in the battle against history, just like their parents and grandparents once lost. Crick teaches them of the wisdom that, unfortunately, comes with harbouring feelings of bitterness, but also to have strength in light of the tests that are sure to come their way, and to never betray their principles. Crick exposes this idea in the clearest way in a dialogue playing a very critical role in the book’s structure with his student (and main opponent) Price: “And Lewis said, ‘Is that what you tell your classes?’ And I said, ‘It’s what history tells them: One day you’ll be like your parents. But if in becoming like their parents, they’ve struggled not to be like them, if they’ve tried’ (you see, Price, why the student must resist the teacher, the young must suspect the old) ‘if they’ve tried and so prevented things slipping. If they haven’t let the world get any *worse*—?’”²⁵

The novel *Waterland* echoed the question so intensely discussed at the end of the 20th century: can we really understand the past and talk about it? The writer was trying to solve questions that mattered not only to historians at the time, trying to get their heads around the challenges of postmodernism, but also to a whole generation of British writers. Author Del Ivan Janik states: “Indeed, a significant number of the more ambitious English novels of the 1980s and 1990s have in common an acute consciousness of history and a sharp focus on its meanings or potential for meaning. These novels are, for the most part, the products of an identifiable generation of writers who were born in the Forties or early Fifties and came of age professionally in the Eighties: the first generation of the post-World War II era. <...> The other novelists I have in mind include Peter Ackroyd, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro, and, pre-eminently, Graham Swift”.²⁶

²⁵ Swift, *Waterland*, 330–331.

²⁶ Del Ivan Janik, “No End of History: Evidence from the Contemporary English Novel,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 2 (1995): 161.

These British writers delved into complicated issues of knowing and recreating the past, while perfectly aware that they and historians are carrying out the same task – forming historical culture.

So, Swift is a typical representative of his generation, which has an acute concern for history and its meaning. Incidentally, this author's character – the history teacher – is typified by a sense of caution when looking back on great historical narratives. Yet at the same time, Crick painfully searches for the truth and the logic of history. The novel *Waterland* does not debate the realness of history or the possibility of recreating or conveying history, though Swift does draw attention to the problems we encounter when we realise that what we had considered a firm foundation for knowing and telling history is not all that solid. For this reason, for Crick the connection between reason and outcome is not dialectic but dialogue based. Furthermore, the rules of this dialogue are not all that strict, nor are they necessarily pre-defined.²⁷

What do we get from this kind of dialogue relationship? We may recall the idea raised by historian Dominick LaCapra that the dialogue concept of history reveals how the past (the *other*) is “always already” inside the historian, while the historian is “always already” in the linguistic and (or) philosophical past. In *Waterland*, this concept of a dialogue with the past is developed, showing how the main character is a product of the past while also being its creator, a reason for and outcome of the past.

So, the main narrator of stories remembers, imagines, investigates, interprets and creates the past, while also trying to heal his tortured soul. Swift's novel *Waterland* reveals how the telling of history(ies) (even fictional stories) can help us come to terms with the past.

IF I'M NOT A PART OF ALL THAT, THEN WHAT AM I ...? *MOON TIGER* (1987)

Penelope Lively, much like Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, Edna O'Brien, and Anita Brookner, is one of those female novelists who contributed to the fundamental processes of change that unfolded in British literature in the second half of the 20th century.

“I never re-read my books but if I look at it I know I couldn't write *Moon Tiger* now”, said the writer in 2018, already well into her years, in an interview with *Financial Times* arts editor Jan Dalley, recalling the circumstances of her novel's appearance.²⁸ In 1987, *Moon Tiger* was awarded the Man Booker Prize and is sometimes called by 21st-century literary critics “the most unappreciated novel to have won this prize”. In it, Lively ponders the same questions Graham

²⁷ John Lloyd Marsden, *After modernism: Representations of the past in the novels of Graham Swift* (doctoral thesis, Ohio University, 1996), 125–126.

²⁸ Jan Dalley, “Interview with Penelope Lively: Every Writer I Know is a Hungry Reader,” *The Financial Times*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/962450a2-7499-11e8-b6ad-3823e4384287>.

Swift explored when writing his novel *Waterland*. These centre on the individual's efforts to find their place in the flow of time, attempts to understand traumatic experience and come to terms with it, and the goal to grasp the interaction between memory and imagination.

As I already mentioned, the themes of history's (re)creation, interpretation, and presentation were important to several generations of British writers, while history theorists, when looking at the work of novelists such as the author of *Moon Tiger*, state: "... these novels again emphatically indicate that historiographical issues may actually be better presented to a wider public through the medium of fiction than, more conventionally, within the constraints of academic books and articles. Indeed, we might claim that the novels to be considered here together present, not simply an excellent example of fiction meeting history, but an impressive 'fictional' popularisation of seemingly recondite 'historiographical' matters (and 'popularisation' here is to be taken as a term of praise)".²⁹

The greater part of the story in *Moon Tiger* is born in the mind of a 76-year-old journalist, war correspondent, and historian Claudia Hampton, when she is dying in hospital with intestinal cancer. The scientist reflects on her life and tries to relate it to the dramatic history of the 20th century, and to create a feminist interpretation of it.³⁰ 'I'm writing a history of the world', says Claudia to the nurse leaning over her. The nurse, lowering her eyes at the infirm old woman, not quite sure how to react to such a statement, splutters out: 'Well, my goodness <...> That's quite a thing to be doing, isn't it?'³¹ To tell the truth, it is a rare historian, male or female, who would take up this kind of task – to encompass the variety of history in one narrative – even if they were in their prime, as the writing of a synthesis spanning centuries always carries with it a certain degree of professional and existential risk. The risk of not finding the right interpretational key or not managing all the material, the risk of creating generalised images so as to simplify, trivialise or distort the historical reality, the risk of losing the race against time and not completing the synthesis delving into the depths of the past. After all, great and grand pictures of the past world are the fruit of a whole lifetime's creativity, a desire to do the impossible and take in everything that at first glance seems to be beyond the scope of one person's mind. That is why the history of historiography contains numerous accounts about dire yet also great failures: Henry Thomas Buckle failed to write his planned ambitious history of the world's civilisations, Fernand Braudel never completed his most personal book *L'Identité de la France*, while Tony Judt, his illness rapidly progressing, never realised his dream of writing the book *Locomotion*, intended to be all about Europe, trains and love.

Yet the main character in Lively's novel, Claudia, is not one who ever searched for the easy way. The historical community always criticised her, ignored her, called her a populariser of history, while "Reviewers have frequently con-

²⁹ Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, 85.

³⁰ Mary Hurley Moran, "Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*: A Feminist «History of the World»," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 11, no. 2/3 (1990): 89–95.

³¹ Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 1.

demned her out of her own luck and—it must be said—frequently imprecise and contradictory prose”.³² Though Claudia is not swayed by any of this, conversely—it inspired her to polemicise and write new texts. In fact, it was precisely the conscious awareness of her inner desire to search for the truth in harsh, passionate, argument-based discussions that determined Claudia’s decision to become a historian: “Argument, of course, is the whole point of history. Disagreement; my word against yours; this evidence against that. If there were such a thing as absolute truth the debate would lose its lustre. I, for one, would no longer be interested”.³³ The word “interesting” is fundamental here. Claudia’s reckless determination to strive forward, to live and explore is related to her unfailing curiosity, her desire to understand a whole variety of things: the story of Hernán Cortés, the figure of Napoleon, the situation on the front in 1941, the persona of Josip Broz Tito and his politics. By focusing on the things that were important to her, Claudia would reject without compromise anything that did not interest her (“Ideology. Industrial history. Economics.”),³⁴ while also trying to understand how some people managed to find a gap in reality and in that gap create something that contradicted the established world order and the rules that supported it.

That is why it comes as no surprise that, when faced with non-existence, the historian dares to take a leap into the unknown—this will be “The history of the world as selected by Claudia: fact and fiction, myth and evidence, images and documents”.³⁵ Note that this decision is not just another display of intellectual bravura by a scientist who has gone about demolishing established conventions her whole life with particular passion and gusto. No, the woman staring death in the eye must simply look back on the path she has taken, to try to relate it to 20th-century history and reflect on the tensions she experienced, and the contradictions in life and death, private and public existence, East and West, trauma and healing, memory and forgetting. It was precisely these dramatic interweavings of contradictions that determined what form Claudia’s last narrative would take – it would be very personal, painful, yet also multivoiced and kaleidoscopic. “There is no chronology inside my head”—this dying woman’s idea reveals how she will create her last story—by consistently continuing down her own path, as an unconventional historian who was always suspicious of linear narratives.³⁶

The points of intersection between great and personal history are the historian’s own memories, which come flooding back to her in various situations: during a visit by her brother Gordon’s wife Sylvia, momentarily forgetting what a curtain is called, exchanging a few phrases with her daughter Lisa about (dis)belief in God, or when glancing at a poinsettia. In these ways, the spaces of the collective past and personal experience grow closer, while caught in the epicentre between forgetting and memory, life and non-existence, wakefulness and wandering the dreamscape, Claudia remarks: “Time and the universe lie around in our

³² Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 60.

³³ Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 14.

³⁴ Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 37.

³⁵ Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 1.

³⁶ Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 2.

minds. We are sleeping histories of the world”.³⁷ For readers of the novel, Claudia’s reliable memories, which form the core of the novel’s narrative, are like a collage of separate fragments that do not come together into one, uniform narrative. We have both the shards of a happy childhood, and the shrapnel of the war years, details from the Cold War—at each stage, Claudia’s life is, as they say, good enough, it does not need a specific connection to the calendar. These memories, like the parts of a ship sinking in a sea of waste and oblivion, orbit about the central event in Claudia Hampton’s life – an emotionally very intense albeit brief love affair, experienced in Cairo in 1941 with a young British officer, Tom Southern. When thinking back on these fragments of the past, Claudia’s voice sometimes falls silent. It is then that we hear her mother Edith Hampton, her sister-in-law Sylvia, her lover and the father of her only child Jasper, and her daughter Lisa. They let us see Claudia and her life in a new light. After all, as she herself says, “The voice of history, of course, is composite. Many voices; all the voices that have managed to get themselves heard. Some louder than others, naturally”.³⁸ The sound of these voices is crucially necessary to Claudia—it is the best evidence that the experiences of the woman telling this story were actually real. Furthermore, the stories told by these other characters allow us, the witnesses, to sense the realness of the novel’s protagonist.

In the polyphonic narrative mentioned above, it is the testimony by the love of Claudia’s life Tom that stands out, what he had to endure in a head-on collision with History, indifferent as to who it injures or kills, which played out on the war front expanding over the sands of Egypt. This painful story about boredom and apathy, fear (and the fear of fear), stultifying fatigue leading to utter exhaustion, and feelings of love for a woman identified by the first letter of her name “C”, noted in the British officer’s diary, which Claudia got hold of after his death. Claudia rereads the pale green school notebook once again in her hospital bed, just before her death. Tom’s diary is not only testimony of the fragility and helplessness of human life amid a raging war but also reminds us that human life is determined by unstable moments, which do not evaporate as the present turns into the past, but continue to exist in the consciousness of the person who experienced them (or who found out about them): “that everything can be retrieved, that a lifetime is not linear but instant. That, inside the head, everything happens at once”.³⁹ The comprehension of these things becomes another reason why Claudia wants to relate her life to the history of the world. This is how this woman, on her deathbed, tries to rescue her memories and the people dear to her that live on in them: the father she never knew who was killed by history at the Somme, her mother who voluntarily erased herself from history and dedicated her whole life to floribunda roses, her eternal rival and existential sparring partner, her talented yet “lazy-souled” sibling Gordon, and the love of her life—found at the edge of the world, in the sands of Egypt, and ultimately lost there as well in

³⁷ Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 65.

³⁸ Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 5.

³⁹ Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 68.

the throes of war. By telling us about these people, Claudia gets to keep hold of them for at least one moment more, as her history will survive in the memory and stories of others.

With her unique narrative, the historian also proves that in many of the books written by her contemporaries, the past is turned into an elaborate film decoration having little in common with reality, where that which is usually of the greatest importance in history is lost: risk, confusion, death, and the pain of loss. All of this, as Claudia remarks, has no meaning, yet despite this far from consolatory conclusion, the need to remember remains alive, to feel a sense of oneness with those who made the same journey in time and space, to relate your own and their experiences with history, which carries everything away like a river.

Why did Penelope Lively decide to tell Claudia's story? Literature critic Luke Strongman says that this novel (also attributed to the historiographic metafiction subgenre) reveals several different levels of history: a woman's life and how her awareness of it changes, the dramatic experiences of Claudia's family, and the evolution of the telling of history using various narrative strategies (related to the narrator's experience and transformation).⁴⁰ Claudia's life and the narrative that reflects it spans the reality of the pre-war and post-war United Kingdom, industrial and post-industrial Europe, post-Ford and postmodern America, and Egypt, which survived World War II and then experienced a postcolonial existence. In other words, a world shaken by change and ensconced in entropy opens up before Claudia's eyes. The woman tries to understand it all by reflecting and relating what she had to go through.

Why is the story of the woman's life and work told to us in Lively's novel important to us? We would be wise to recall the words of writer Lemn Sissay from 2018: "People should read Penelope Lively because I think this book now is more relevant than it was when it was a Booker Prize winner the 1980s".⁴¹ What did Sissay mean by this? Perhaps the love of Claudia's life, Tom Southern, will help us understand this writer's idea: "When the times are out of joint it is brought uncomfortably home to you that history is true and that unfortunately you are the part of it".⁴²

Moon Tiger reminds us of the individual's ephemeral existence and also asserts that even in the face of indifferent and brutal history, it is our duty to search for meanings and to create them.

⁴⁰ Luke Strongman, *The Booker Prize and the Legacy of Empire* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2002), 117.

⁴¹ "Lemn Sissay on Choosing *Moon Tiger* for the Golden Man Booker Prize / The Booker Prize," The Booker Prizes, published on June 21, 2018, YouTube video, 0:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v90ueDftAzA>.

⁴² Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 103.

HATE AS A STIMULUS TO WRITE? *THE TUNNEL* (1995)

“I write because I hate. A lot”. – this is what American writer William H. Gass said in a 1977 interview published by *The Paris Review*.⁴³

William H. Gass began writing his novel *The Tunnel* in 1966, and spent the next twenty-six years working on it. From 1969, the writer published fragments of the book in various literary magazines, anthologies, and other publications (up to the novel’s release, more than three hundred of the work’s pages had already been published). Publications of extracts from *The Tunnel* were often accompanied by Gass’ theoretical essays or interviews, in which the writer discussed and explained his idea, thereby creating “instructions” for the novel’s readers and laying down the intellectual guidelines for researchers of his work.

Extracts from *The Tunnel* were awarded various literary prizes on numerous occasions, while the slow process of writing the novel, with long pauses, became an object of literary researchers’ interest in itself, being rated as “an interesting and exemplary case of postmodernity in literature, and of the features of post-modern fiction in particular”.⁴⁴

In an interview with the writer in 1972, he explained his goal as follows: “*The Tunnel* is crucial work for me. All my work up to it I have privately thought of as exercises and preparations [...]. Now I shall find out whether I am any good.”⁴⁵

How did the author manage to answer the question he himself posed?

In 1995 the Alfred A. Knopf publishing house finally published the novel numbering more than 650 pages and with twelve chapters, where the main character is William Frederik Kohler – a professor of modern German history and specialist in the Third Reich at an unnamed Midwestern university. The book has no clear storyline, as nothing really happens during the whole narrative, which is why the story-telling lacks the structure most readers are familiar with.

The novel begins when the historian has just completed his life’s work. Kohler’s *opus magum* is a book of impressive scope – *Guilt and Innocence in Hitler’s Germany*. Kohler was inspired to take on this task by his own personal experience. In the 1930s, at the start of the Nazi era, Kohler was studying history and philosophy at a German university, where he met someone who was to have a huge impact on his life—Magus Tabor (we may presume that the Magus Tabor character was created with the philosopher Martin Heidegger in mind), while later on, Kohler performed what was to him the unsavoury role of a consultant on “dirty Fascist things” at the Nuremberg Trials.⁴⁶

⁴³ Thomas LeClair, “William Gass: The Art of Fiction No 65,” *The Paris Review* (Summer 1977), <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3576/the-art-of-fiction-no-65-william-gass>.

⁴⁴ John M. Unsworth, “William Gass’s *The Tunnel*: The Work in Progress as Post-Modern Genre,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 48, no. 1 (1992): 65.

⁴⁵ Carole Spearin McCauley, “Fiction Needn’t Say Things – It Should Make Them Out of Words: An Interview with William H. Gass,” *Falcon* 5 (Winter 1972): 44.

⁴⁶ William H. Gass, *The Tunnel* (Funks Grove, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 4.

Incidentally, Kohler is yet to write an introduction for this book. A task that is at first glance seemingly simple for a historian turns into an insurmountable challenge. According to Gass himself, "It is supposed to be an aggressive and self-important preface, and he finds himself unable to write it".⁴⁷

Meanwhile, as the book's reviewer Marcus Klein observes, "Contemplation of his introduction leads him to consideration of the past and present of his own life along with questions of guilt and innocence of the personal sort..."⁴⁸ Gary Percesepe arrives at an analogous interpretation of the writer's creative idea, "Blocked, he writes instead a history of history, or better, a history of the historian-as-liar, lout and loser".⁴⁹

Thinking about what should be written in his book's introduction, Kohler starts to dig a tunnel (in fact? in metaphor?) as an attempt to flee from himself, his family, and his life. Digging ever deeper into the earth (or sitting in his chair, which was given to him by Magus Tabor), Kohler shares his memories, reflects on events from some time in his past, tells us of funny and indecent happenings, mouthing off at and reviling his relatives, students and colleagues.

So, from Kohler's random stories, fragmented recollections and reflections, we find out about a little boy, an only child, raised in some Midwestern town by an alcoholic mother and a verbally brutal father. This unhappy boy grows up and becomes an ugly-looking, fat, neurotic, hate-filled, covertly fascist, verbally brutal professor, whose life is brimming with feelings of guilt, frustration, and disillusionment.

These are very personal notes, which is why the historian hides them among the pages of his *magnum opus*. While reading these notes, one constantly asks oneself: is what is being told here actually true? This sensation of permanent tension and uncertainty follows the reader as they make their way through *The Tunnel*. As does the feeling that the text before you is not meant for public viewing. The author himself highlighted the latter aspect:

I wanted to make sure that the text which the narrator is engaged in creating is as personal, odd, and as far from the historical research and writing he has been doing as possible. You don't find cartoons, doodles, limericks, and so on, in any ordinary history book. I wanted to convince the reader that the text he or she is reading is an entirely private one; that it has no ultimate or public aim.⁵⁰

What did William H. Gass want to say with this novel? Why did the writer dedicate so much time and effort to create such a horrible literary character, a real moral monster, who shocks and insults the reader?

⁴⁷ Bradford Morrow, "An Interview: William H. Gass," *Conjunctions* 4 (1983): 14.

⁴⁸ Marcus Klein, "Postmodernising the Holocaust: William Gass in *The Tunnel*," *New England Review* 18, no. 3 (1997): 79.

⁴⁹ Gary Percesepe, "What's Eating William Gass?," Fictionaut, Accessed September 20, 2024, <http://fictionaut.com/stories/gary-percesepe/whats-eating-william-gass>.

⁵⁰ Heide Ziegler, "William H. Gass in Germany," in *Conversations with William H. Gass*, ed. Theodore G. Ammon (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2003), 111.

In one of his interviews, Gass said: the most important objective is to produce a work that will be the model of Kohler's mind. Or conversely—to create a consciousness in the form of a novel.⁵¹

It is clear that the (anti)hero's consciousness fills the narrative line of the whole novel, consisting of twelve chapters. We could say that the narrative itself (filled with history) is just an important character in the book as the history professor Kohler. Incidentally, the intellectual father of this historian, Magus Tabor, believed that language creates historical facts. How does this happen? Gass searched for an answer to this question, and came up with a manifestation of his own attitude towards historical research. "History is an attempt to create a non-textual world from texts and by means of its own texts", he said in one interview about the threat of the disappearance of truth when asked to explain why the main character in his novel was a historian researching the Holocaust.⁵²

Gass returned to this idea numerous times. The writer has described *The Tunnel* as an exploration of "the inside of history," revealing the ambiguities, doubts and complexity hiding under our attempts to understand the past.

"Historians tend to want to create a narrative, to make the world along the lines of the so-called realistic novels of the 19th century that pretended the world has meaning, that there are heroes and heroines and climaxes and real denouements and turning points", he explained. "I happen to believe in none of that, so I feel my book is real realism: there's contradiction and confusion and deliberate darkness".⁵³

By no means does Gass want to say that the historical truth does not exist, and that all we have are changing and unstable narrative constructions. The American writer has several times distanced himself from the postmodern movement's ideas and stylistics. In his novel, Gass coherently develops one idea of great importance to him: "personal truth and historical truth have the same medium of construction and conveyance: language".⁵⁴ That is why in this case, the fundamental question is how do we create language, and how does language create us?

Gass' third objective would have to be the elucidation of his pessimism regarding man's and society's ability to refrain from evil, by trying to answer the question: How do we explain the Holocaust?

Gass expresses his own pessimistic view with Kohler's help: the Holocaust was not a chance event, we are prepared to give in to the attractions of evil, or to its pressure, and to serve in its name. The latter frightening thought is consistently revealed presenting the ideas espoused in Kohler's book *Guilt and Innocence in*

⁵¹ Jan Garden Castro, "An Interview with William Gass," *Bulletin of the Association of Departments of English* 70 (Winter 1981): 31.

⁵² Kaposi Ildikó, "A Talk with William H. Gass," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 3, no. 1 (1997): 11.

⁵³ Robert Kelly, "A Repulsively Lonely Man," *New York Times Book Review* (February 26, 1995): 18.

⁵⁴ Tendel Aristie, "The Quest for Truth in William Gass's *The Tunnel* (1995)," *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion* 37 (2013): 141.

Hitler's Germany, a short summary of which fits into one paradoxical statement: it would be a mistake to place all responsibility for World War II and the Holocaust solely on Hitler and the Nazis.

According to Robert Kelly, the theory of Kohler's treatise seems to be something like this: Hitler was a wimp and couldn't have done a thing by himself; it was the massive resentment of the German people that did his work. So the German people are guilty, and the Nazis curiously innocent.⁵⁵

At first glance, this idea of Kohler's is absurd. But let's not rush with such generalisations. As one of the book's reviewers astutely noted: "The problem with the character is not that he is a monster; the problem is that the monster has taken recognisable human form. We feel comfortable blaming a Hitler, but in this book Hitler is just a spark that sets resentment ablaze".⁵⁶ Another researcher of Gass' work goes even further: "And to say is to say that we are all fascists albeit in our little ways, and then to say that is to say in turn that we [are] all guilty..."⁵⁷

Can we associate these ideas of Gass with those of Hannah Arendt? Absolutely. The leitmotif in Gass' novel, which becomes his goal, is to study the phenomenon he calls "the fascism of the heart", inspired by Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil". However, in this case one other thing should be said. The idea of the universality of evil expressed in Gass' novel is fundamentally associated with the writer's own existential provisions. "I'm not a humanist", said the writer in one interview.⁵⁸

How was Gass' novel received?

The Tunnel won the American Book Award in 1996, and immediately became an object of academic study, while the novel's reviewers split into two camps.

"A bleak, black book, it engenders awe and despair," stated Michael Silverblatt in his review, simultaneously extolling the author's demonstrated mastery of his craft.⁵⁹ Though there were also reviewers who had totally different views. In Robert Alter's opinion, the book is "sheer adipose verbosity and an unremitting condition of moral and intellectual flatulence".⁶⁰

There were attempts to draw out direct parallels between the writer and the (anti)hero he created: both are from the Midwest, both have German roots, both of their families were dysfunctional, both teach at university.⁶¹ It is obvious that those pursuing such commonalities made a fundamental mistake—they identified the author with his work, and were sidetracked in the process.

⁵⁵ Kelly, "A Repulsively Lonely Man," 18.

⁵⁶ Michael Silverblatt, "A Small Apartment in Hell: William Gass' magnum opus shoehorns us into a most claustrophobic space: the mind of a bigot," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1995, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1995-03-19-bk-44339-story.html>.

⁵⁷ Klein, "Postmodernising the Holocaust," 85.

⁵⁸ Kaposi Ildikó, "A Talk with William H. Gass," 9.

⁵⁹ Silverblatt, "A Small Apartment in Hell."

⁶⁰ Robert Alter, "The Leveling Wind. *The Tunnel* by William H. Gass," *New Republic* 13 (March 27, 1995): 29.

⁶¹ The author himself has reflected numerous times on attempts to identify him with Kohler. See, for example: Ildikó, "A Talk," 12.

The meaning of Gass' work does in fact begin to reveal itself when viewed in the context of other works about historians. The main character in Lively's novel embraced writing her last narrative so as to remember and relate her own experiences and those of people dear to her to history, thereby preserving them for at least a moment, countervailing against the evil that hurt or destroyed these people.

The main character of the historian in Swift's novel, trying to not lose his way or perish in the dark labyrinth of his own past, told stories that became like a ball of string, helping him return from the epicentre of darkness.

The aim of the antihero in Gass' novel was different—not to fight evil, but to voluntarily travel down to the very core of that labyrinth of darkness, and thereby finally grasp the nature of evil that poisons people's and society's lives. He succeeded in this, yet had to pay an enormous price for this knowledge. This is why Kohler's stories (like the scientist's own life) are infused with disappointment, meaninglessness, and contempt for himself and others.

POST SCRIPTUM. WHAT OTHER NOVELS SHOULD BE DISCUSSED?

Researchers of the past rarely become the main characters of novels because the work of these scientists in university auditoria, school classrooms, libraries or archives provides few opportunities for novelists to create intriguing narratives. Can anything so special or intriguing happen in an ordinary day of a historian's life making it worthy of a writer's plume? Novelists have, as a rule, answered this question by creating secondary characters, portraits of oddball loners whose knowledge sometimes helps unravel complicated cases relating to robberies or murders. In these kinds of books, historians are like actors playing episodic roles, appearing on stage for just a short time, only long enough to utter a few words.

At this point I should mention the "historical mystery" or "historical crime fiction" subgenre so popular in the United States and the United Kingdom, in which writers create interesting and appealing portraits of characters. These characters, as a rule, investigate crimes carried out in various past epochs (e.g., in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, this type of character is the Franciscan friar William of Baskerville).⁶²

Much less commonly do historians become the main characters of detective or adventure novels, where they must themselves unravel the convoluted mysteries behind a crime (this task fell on the main character from Jean-Christophe Grangé's novel *Flight of the Storks*, Louis Antioch).⁶³ In this instance, the novel by Lithuanian intellectual, politician and diplomat Mantas Adomėnas *Moneta & la-*

⁶² The portrait gallery of various crime investigators, likened to historians for their erudition and work methods, is discussed in: Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr., *The Detective as Historian: History and Art in Historical Crime Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000).

⁶³ Jean-Christophe Grangé, *Flight of the Storks* (London: Harvill Pres, 2003).

birintas [The Coin and the Labyrinth] is an exception, where a historian chooses the danger-filled path of a spy so that he may participate in the covert battle between intelligence agencies and defend Lithuanian and Central Eastern Europe from the rogue schemes of the imperial criminal businesses and special agents ruling Russia at the turn of the 21st century.⁶⁴

When discussing the portraits of historians created in popular literature, we should not forget a text attributable to another specific genre. Very interesting portraits of historians may be found in sci-fi fantasy novels,⁶⁵ with the Strugatsky brothers' Arkady and Boris' novel *Hard to be a God* topping the list (which explores the theme of a historian's moral dilemmas in the face of evil) and Connie Willis' series of novels (*Doomsday Book*, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, *Blackout/All Clear*) about Oxford University historians who built a time machine and travelled to various epochs⁶⁶. Encountering people from different epochs, these scientists have various adventures and face challenges, also being forced to decide on difficult questions concerning the historian's craft and their relationship with politicians and society. In this context, we should recall also Stephen Fry's sci-fi-tinged experiment *Making History*, where we learn about the attempts of Michael "Puppy" Young, a history student at Cambridge University, to change the history of the second half of the 20th century with the help of a time-machine⁶⁷.

In his science fiction book series *Foundation*, Isaac Asimov presented an ambitious idea about the formation of the development of history using the theory of psychohistory, a new and effective mathematics of sociology. It is none other than historians (not psychohistorians!) who play a fateful role in the history of humanity and the universe in several of the books in this series (*Second Foundation* and *Foundation's Edge*)⁶⁸.

I should also add here that the three authors' works (belonging to the high literature genre) analysed in this article are not the only ones deserving the close attention of historians. In addition to the books discussed here, other texts that are just as important include Wyndham Lewis' *Self Condemned*, Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, Winfried Georg Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, and Jose Saramago's *The Double*⁶⁹.

⁶⁴ Mantas Adomėnas, *Moneta & labirintas* (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2023).

⁶⁵ Science fiction books enter historians' field of vision as an original approach to historical thinking or even as a form of historical genre. One of the most interesting texts is: Janice Liedl, "Tales of futures past: science fiction as a historical genre," *Rethinking Historical Genres in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jaume Aurell (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 141–155.

⁶⁶ Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Hard to be a God* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973); Connie Willis, *Doomsday Book* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 1992); Connie Willis, *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (New York: Bantam Spectra, 1997); Connie Willis, *Blackout/All Clear* (New York: Spectra, 2010).

⁶⁷ Stephen Fry, *Making History* (London: Hutchinson, 1996).

⁶⁸ Isaac Asimov, *Second Foundation* (New York: Gnome Press, 1953); Isaac Asimov, *Foundation's Edge* (New York: Doubleday, 1982).

⁶⁹ Lewis Wyndham, *Self Condemned* (London: Methuen, 1954); Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* (New York: Doubleday, 1954); Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (New York: Doubleday, 1971); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (London: Penguin Books, 1949); Winfried Georg Sebald,

Unique portraits of historians can also be found in novels by Central East European authors—in the aforementioned novel by Mantas Adomėnas *The Coin and the Labyrinth*, Wiesław Myśliwski's *Needle's Eye*, and Andriy Lyubka's *Carbide*⁷⁰.

So, the work started in this article must be continued, researching the portraits of historians being created in novels.

CONCLUSIONS

What kind of portrait of a historian (historians) emerges in the mirror of contemporary literature?

The portraits of historians coming to light in the three novels by Swift, Lively, and Gass discussed in this article are of complicated, melodramatic personalities, rebellious people with a difficult destiny who are trying to come to terms with the outcomes of trauma. They live through the crisis arising from these mentioned traumas and the change of time regimes.

For the main characters in these three novels, a fundamental existential and professional challenge is the question raised by Linda Hutcheon: *how* can we know the past today—and *what* can we know of it?

This is not a problem for its own sake. Rather, it highlights another problem—how do we change during the course of learning about and narrating the past? These things are fundamentally interrelated, as in the novels discussed in this article it is first of all history that is transformed into a mode of consciousness.

What happens during this transformation?

The main characters from Swift's and Lively's novels—a history teacher and a scholar—try to become self-aware amid the brutal chaos of history and search for answers to fundamental existential questions. The protagonist in Gass' novel on the other hand—a university professor—creates this chaos himself, and proceeds to drown in it.

The above questions raised in the three novels reflect trends that came to light in the second half of the 20th century—the growing prevalence of the concept of grand history as a slaughterhouse, doubting acknowledged authority figures and the universal narratives they create, increased attention to processes of research of the past and the narration of history, and raising the question of the historian's accountability for their activities.

Do the novels by Swift, Lively, and Gass help us better understand how today's society perceives the historian's profession? Clearly, in the works discussed in this article the authors are first of all resolving artistic objectives they deem important, they aren't really trying to join in debates underway in historiography; however, the questions they raise and the answers they offer are very important to

Austerlitz (New York: Random House, 2001); Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking Press, 1985); Jose Saramago, *The Double* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004).

⁷⁰ Wiesław Myśliwski, *Needle's Eye* (New York: Archipelago books, 2025); Andriy Lyubka, *Carbide* (Kent: Jantar Publishing, 2022).

the historians' community as well. The portraits of historians who doubt, make mistakes, suffer, and persevere in searching for the truth that emerge in these novels, as if in a mirror, allow us to understand that both for writers and the readers of their works, researchers of the past who lived at the end of the 20th century, have little in common with those scholars who adhered to Leopold von Ranke's promise from the late 19th – first half of the 20th century to reveal *how things actually were* ("wie es eigentlich gewesen"), whom society at the time were inclined to see as the inhabitants of an ivory tower.

When reading and analysing the novels by Swift, Lively, and Gass, we can arrive at a better understanding of the historical sensibilities of contemporary society, its historical consciousness and historical imagination, and also—the time regime in which we are living.

One of the important elements in this time regime (which Aleida Assman describes as the late phase of the modern time regime, while François Hartog sees it as a new—presentist—time regime) is that man and society are painfully searching for an answer to the question of how to connect the fractured bonds between the past, present, and future dimensions into one meaningful whole, how to strike a balance between continuity and change, how to explain the meaning of radical, often terrifying and painfully insulting experiences, and how, despite these experiences, to retain the ability to tell stories filled with meaning and hope.

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