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The Neo-Historical Aesthetic:  
Mediations of Historical Narrative in Post-Postmodern  
Fiction

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PhD in English

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**Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

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## **Abstract**

### **The neo-historical aesthetic: Mediations of historical narrative in post-postmodern fiction**

This thesis defines the neo-historical aesthetic: a post-postmodern literary response to postmodern theories about the limitations of narrative for accessing the past. Variably present in each of the fictional texts considered here, I argue that the neo-historical aesthetic embraces the radical flexibility of postmodernism's deconstructions of narrative *and* maintains a commitment to coherent narrative (after historiographic metafiction). My identification of the neo-historical aesthetic is a substantial, original contribution to knowledge, establishing the ongoing development of post-postmodernism in contemporary culture and diagnosing a contemporary relationship to history, fiction, and narrative.

Chapter one defines post-postmodernism as self-contradictory, the product of neoliberal consumer capitalism, via theorists such as Jeffrey T. Nealon, Fredric Jameson, and Peter Boxall. Redefining 'authenticity', through #liveauthentic on Instagram, further discerns a changed relationship to 'truth' in post-postmodern culture. I demonstrate the neo-historical manifestation of this with analyses of anachronisms and narrative in Emma Donoghue's *Life Mask* (2004), Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), and Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009). Chapter two recognises the longstanding significance of women's historical fiction, via Diana Wallace, arguing that Sarah Waters's middlebrowness is (problematically) imbricated within her invention of neo-historical, post-postmodern histories for those marginalised from canonical history. Defining the middlebrow, alongside Beth Driscoll and Nicola Humble, and analysing representations of class in accessible novels *The Night Watch* (2006) and *The Paying Guests* (2014) positions that middlebrow as both influenced by and resistant to postmodernism. Chapter three analyses historical fictions about ghosts—novel *Dark Matter* (2010), and films *The Others* (2001) and *The Awakening* (2011)—connecting the neo-historical aesthetic to neo-Victorianism and the Gothic. Using Jacques Derrida's and Peter Buse and Andrew Stott's works, I explore how the logic of haunted spectrality, which is ontologically uncertain and combines temporalities, encourages this coexistence of postmodern and pre-postmodern relationships to narrative. This is visible in Derridean spectral, trace meanings (e.g. Waters's use of 'queer') and haunted proleptic ironies in *Wolf Hall*. Via Buse and Stott, in the fourth chapter I explore how contemporary literary steampunk seeks to resolve this;

its solid technologies and bodies effectively *de*-spectralise those real/not-real neo-historical ontologies.

This thesis articulates a post-postmodern, self-contradictory relationship to history and narrative as manifested in the previously unrecognised neo-historical aesthetic. Haunted and ontologically uncertain, but accessibly middlebrow, the neo-historical aesthetic's anachronisms, proleptic ironies, and non-chronological temporalities *do* history *in* fiction.

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## **Introduction**

**‘Some of these things are true and some of them lies. But they are all good stories’:**

### **Defining the neo-historical aesthetic**

This thesis argues that, late in the twentieth century, and in response to changes in understandings of history and narrative wrought by postmodernism, a new aesthetic began to develop in historical fiction. I have termed this aesthetic the ‘neo-historical’, in part for its combining of the new/modern/neo and the old/past/historical. This aesthetic comes in direct response to the postmodern argument that history is flawed due to its need to be accessed through narrative, because narrative inevitably occludes and excludes certain stories and contexts, and is inevitably influenced by authors’ subjectivities. Thus, these exclusions come as a consequence of decisions, conscious or unconscious, made when constructing the narrative, and as a consequence of the functional unknowability of the past in the present. The neo-historical aesthetic acknowledges the inevitable limitations on narratives about the past, but, simultaneously and contradictorily, works to create coherent stories about the past that recognise their own failures even as they attempt to overcome them.

The ‘aesthetic’, then, is the set of images, ideas, themes, and techniques through which the present is made present within a cohesive narrative. Historical fiction texts participate in this aesthetic to varying degrees. Beth Driscoll (2014: 6) uses a broadly Wittgensteinian theoretical methodology for defining the middlebrow, which I will discuss in chapter two. That approach will also prove relevant here. She emphasises that in defining the middlebrow, not all aspects of it are necessarily present in each individual text, supported by Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblance’ in which members of groups share a series of overlapping similarities, but those similarities do not create a set of necessary and sufficient conditions to define participation in the ‘family’: ‘phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all—but they are related to one another in many different ways’ (Wittgenstein 1953: s.65). In Driscoll’s case that ‘family’ is the middlebrow, whereas in my case it is the neo-historical aesthetic. This will apply to the recognition and articulation of the neo-historical aesthetic throughout this thesis; the neo-historical aesthetic can appear in a number of different forms, styles, and language, but my definitions and interpretations of these do not necessarily insist that all of these must be recurrently or constantly present. Rather, I identify a set of overlapping conditions that

suggest the presence of a neo-historical aesthetic, and I propose that this is a significant product of a certain post-postmodern culture.

The neo-historical aesthetic has been visible in some historical fiction published over the past twenty years, and it is most conspicuous in those texts' use of anachronisms. By 'anachronism' I mean language, politics, and images that are visibly not the product of the historical periods in which the novels are set; they could be from the present day or from another period. This is not to say that such anachronisms *could not* have existed in the periods in which the novels are set, but rather that they have a different meaning in the present to that in the past. Those two meanings knowingly and conspicuously coexist within the texts. Through these anachronistic tropes, whether explicitly stated or with subtle contemporary meanings haunting the historical settings, the neo-historical aesthetic emerges, responding to postmodernism by commenting on the artificiality of narratives about the past, emphasising that they are inflected by the present, but doing so within explicitly fictionalised and broadly coherent narratives. Moving one step forward from the deconstruction of all history as narrative, as in its postmodern predecessor, historiographic metafiction—a comparison that runs throughout this thesis—the neo-historical aesthetic uses and builds on this deconstruction to create new narratives and openly fictionalised neo-histories.

The twenty-first century has been a fraught period of cultural change in some respects, and stasis in others. Particularly relevant to my argument are the ways in which postmodernism has been both accepted (as we see in these literary deconstructions of historical narrative) and resisted (as we see in their ongoing insistence that coherent narratives about the past are still possible and desirable). In some ways, the neo-historical aesthetic articulates both the change and the stagnation of the current cultural moment. This contradiction, I will argue, is post-postmodern.

In articulating the self-contradictory relationship to history in post-postmodernism, in the thesis I will refer to relationships to narrative as simultaneously 'postmodern' and 'pre-postmodern'. The former—describing it as a 'postmodern' relationship to narrative—is not intended to suggest that this awareness of the limitations of narrative is uniquely postmodern. I will draw attention to other cultural periods, such as modernism (see my discussion of Walter Benjamin in chapter one), in which interpretations of narrative and its relationship to history have been similarly troubled. Rather, in referring to this action as 'postmodern', I highlight the specific critical and cultural field that has influenced the neo-historical aesthetic itself. So, for example, Patricia Waugh (1984: 2) identified a

postmodern ‘uncertainty about the validity’ of representation, in which ‘fictional writing [...] self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’. This can be read, as it was by Fredric Jameson (1985: 111), as a set of ‘specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism’. The post-postmodern ‘return to narrative’ I am describing in the thesis is, in turn, a deliberate reaction *against* these aspects of *post*modernism. This return to narrative, however, is not specifically a return to high modernist narrative styles, nor is it necessarily a simplistic return to Victorian realism, although both do emerge, at times, within the narratives of the neo-historical aesthetic. This is why I use the term ‘pre-postmodern’ to describe the point of return. In reacting against these postmodern deconstructions, the neo-historical aesthetic represents a broad, unfocused desire to return to a moment before narrative became so ‘insecur[e] about the relationship of fiction to reality’ (Waugh 1984: 2). The narrative *form* of this does not have to be specifically connected to a previous literary movement, so much as it is a pursuit of a moment ‘pre’ that aspect of postmodernism. This ‘pre-postmodern’ is thus a deliberately vague use of language intended to echo the vagueness of the neo-historical reaction against postmodernism.

In this introduction to the arguments that will structure and underpin the thesis as a whole, I will consider one particular example of the neo-historical aesthetic and its textual manifestations: *Wolf Hall* (2009). Interpreting this text elucidates some of the key aspects of the neo-historical aesthetic and offers a productive introduction to the arguments that follow. In my analysis of *Wolf Hall*, my overall methodology will also become apparent. To put it broadly, the thesis will analyse literary texts (mostly novels, with two films) and will read them alongside a range of cultural theory that interacts with my analysis—whether in agreement or disagreement. This allows me to suggest ways in which the fictional texts articulate certain aspects of our present-day relationship to history and narrative, and to the process of ‘doing’ history after postmodernism.

### **Wolf Hall**

One of the most successful—critically-acclaimed, multiple prizewinning, bestselling—historical fictions of the twenty-first century is, of course, Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*.<sup>1</sup> It is the first in a proposed trilogy of novels, of which the second part, *Bring Up the Bodies*, was published in 2012, and the third, *The Mirror and the Light*, is anticipated in 2019. *Wolf Hall* has a fraught relationship to history, narrative, and postmodernism, and it thus plays

a significant role in my analysis at various points in the thesis. The narrative revolves around real-life figure Thomas Cromwell, and his involvement with the court of Henry VIII. Cromwell was the son of a blacksmith, who rose through Tudor society to become a courtier and earl. Mantel's novel seeks to rehabilitate him from his status in historical and literary understandings, where he has long been negatively interpreted, including in descriptions of him as 'Alastair Campbell with an axe', an 'evil figure in a black cloak, lurking in the wings with dishonourable intentions' (Mantel 2010: end matter 4).<sup>2</sup> Instead, in Mantel's novel, Cromwell is a thoughtful, emotionally sensitive pragmatist; he is evidently in pursuit of success and status, but he is also genuinely concerned with the wellbeing and happiness of those around him—and those in power.

*Wolf Hall* tracks Henry VIII's infatuation with, and marriage to, Anne Boleyn, via the falls of Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas More, and Henry's divorce from Katherine of Aragon. The novel has been greeted with astonishing levels of critical acclaim, such as the suggestion that it is 'rightly praised for reinventing the very possibilities of the historical novel' (*Evening Standard* review, quoted in Mantel 2010: vi), as well as the following glowing review:

*Wolf Hall* succeeds on its own terms and then some, both as a non-frothy historical novel and as a display of Mantel's extraordinary talent. Lyrically yet cleanly and tightly written, solidly imagined yet filled with spooky resonances, and very funny at times, it's not like much else in contemporary British fiction. (Tayler 2009)

'Non-frothy' speaks to the disdainful way in which historical fiction often continues to be understood, implying that *Wolf Hall* is partly impressive because of its substance, because it is not light and 'frothy'. This attitude is implicitly a product of, among other things, the genre's history of being critically dismissed as a 'women's genre', predominantly written by and for women. This is another discussion that will re-emerge in chapter two on the middlebrow. The middlebrow is also very explicitly gendered, and describing something as 'middlebrow' has often been treated as an insult, partly as a consequence of the feminised and perceived 'frothy' nature of participants within it. Diana Wallace's *The Woman's Historical Novel* (2005) convincingly argues that women have, throughout the history of historical fiction, used the imaginative space of fiction set in the past to write different kinds of histories, ones that resist the hegemonic structures that would otherwise exclude them from male-dominated historiographies. This longstanding pattern is an important reminder that the neo-historical aesthetic is not necessarily *new* in its participation in this process of imagining history through fiction. I instead argue that the

neo-historical aesthetic's prioritising of a complex, twenty-first-century relationship to narrative gives it a specifically post-postmodern discursive position. In her *Female Gothic Histories* (2013), Wallace argues that Gothic historical fictions in particular have given women spaces to write their fictionalised anti-hegemonic histories. Here, Wallace (2013: 6-7) gives an informative overview of historical fiction criticism from Sir Walter Scott's 'Introductory' to *Waverley* in 1814,<sup>3</sup> which broadly derided (women's) Gothic fictions, through to Georg Lukács in the twentieth century and Jerome de Groot in the twenty-first century, both of whom posit Scott as the progenitor of historical fiction as a genre, and ignore texts such as Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783) that came before it. This *Guardian* review of *Wolf Hall* implies that it is surprising to find a 'non-frothy' historical fictional text, and it therefore follows in this exclusionary and dismissive tradition with its inherent assumptions about the implicitly gendered, light, and unserious nature of historical fiction. Striking in this, then, is that Mantel's Tudor novel(s: praise has been heaped on *Bring Up the Bodies*, too) have managed to evade such gendered and derisive dismissal.

*Wolf Hall* has a complicated engagement with the neo-historical aesthetic, as it is focused on real and widely-researched events, and is an effort to realistically portray a human psyche and its responses to a Tudor life. In the novel, Gregory, Thomas Cromwell's son, reads *The Golden Legend*. This was one of the first texts that Caxton printed in the English language around 1483 (de Voragine 1973), although the stories were likely first compiled in the thirteenth century. Gregory describes it to his father:

Our king takes his descent from this Arthur. He was never really dead but waited in the forest biding his time, or possibly in a lake. He is several centuries old. Merlin is a wizard. He comes later. You will see. There are twenty-one chapters. If it keeps on raining I mean to read them all. Some of these things are true and some of them lies. But they are all good stories. (Mantel 2010: 222)

*The Golden Legend* thus acts as a historical text-within-a-text in *Wolf Hall*. Through Gregory's engagement with it, Mantel is able to explore some of *Wolf Hall's* own relationship to history and to the present day. In the Tudor period, people's understandings of history and fiction did not necessarily straightforwardly distinguish them as separate categories. However, that is not the focus here: Gregory is a character written in the twenty-first century, with all of its concordant, middlebrow relationships to the past's accessibility through narrative. Gregory's explanation of *The Golden Legend* thus offers insight into the neo-historical process, and his whimsy, so different from his father's arch—though not emotionless—pragmatism, is visible in this quotation. Gregory

is evidently profoundly committed to the ‘history’ portrayed in *The Golden Legend*, despite the fact that it contains uncertain fictionalities, i.e. the lack of clarity on whether Arthur was waiting in a forest or a lake, and the definitive assertion of the historical existence of wizards. This relationship to truth and text makes Gregory a useful cipher for a neo-historical imagination. He is prepared to embrace fictionality, but also places heavy emphasis on the heritage produced by that fiction: ‘Our king takes his descent from this Arthur’. The simultaneity of this fictionality and confidence in narrative is thus a productive analogy for the contradictions of the neo-historical aesthetic more widely: ‘Some of these things are true and some of them lies. But they are all good stories’. Gregory also uttered a variant on this just a page earlier, “‘Some of these things are true’”, he says, “‘some not’” (Mantel 2010: 221). In both of these expressions, we see how Mantel gives knowing nudges to her readers, subtly drawing attention to the novel’s complex cultural relationship to the past/present and to narrative, and its concordant invention of a different kind of non-canonical history. That this is ‘knowing’ is an important aspect of the neo-historical aesthetic and its reliance on a certain set of relationships between author, reader, and text. In all of its middlebrow accessibility, the neo-historical aesthetic needs to remain knowingly visible and interpretable, so that its post-postmodern method of imagining history remains apparent. Articulating this ‘knowingness’ will form a significant part of my analysis in chapter three of the thesis.

Much later in the narrative of *Wolf Hall*, in one of the concluding paragraphs of the novel, Cromwell reflects on a new history that has recently been written, a history that has a challenging relationship to Gregory’s interpretation of *The Golden Legend*:

Just this last year a scholar, a foreigner, has written a chronicle of Britain, which omits King Arthur on the ground that he never existed. A good ground, if he can sustain it; but Gregory says, no, he is wrong. Because if he is right, what will happen to Avalon? What will happen to the sword in the stone? (Mantel 2010: 650)

Mantel here offers yet another subtle nudge to the reader, reminding us of the complexities of ‘doing’ history, and the contradictorily heavy draw of fiction and narrative within this. The emphasis on the fact that the scholar is ‘a foreigner’ may imply that he would have a different interpretive authorial position to someone British, and therefore be differently emotionally (and patriotically?) invested in British history (there is no mention of the author of *The Golden Legend* in *Wolf Hall*). The scholar’s authorial subject position is therefore highlighted. His text takes the basic tenet of previously understood



British ‘history’ (as discussed above, these mythologies are at least understood as ‘history’ within the narrative of *Wolf Hall*) and excludes it from his new version of historical events.

Cromwell, the pragmatist, accepts that ‘if [the scholar] can sustain’ the argument that Arthur did not exist, this is a ‘good ground’ for excluding Arthur from this newly written history. Remarkable, here, is that this is not a given; it does not appear to be assumed that Arthur should be excluded just because he did not exist. Cromwell’s willingness to accept this potential exclusion of fiction from history is a rejection of the mythologising habits of his mentor, Cardinal Wolsey. This is therefore perhaps a turning away from the methods of his father-figure, towards a new, less whimsical approach to understanding the past and contemporary politics. There is an emphasis here—from Cromwell’s perspective, but also, implicitly, from the scholar’s, who might represent a new trend in how to ‘do’ narratives about the past—on ‘factual’ history, on the idea that there is some accurate version of historical ‘truth’, which can be accurately told.

However, the counterpoint to this is, of course, Gregory, whose commitment to ‘good stories’, as discussed above, already makes him a neo-historical character, articulating a different relationship to history. He takes a delightfully idiosyncratic and contradictory approach to the problem: if the scholar is right, and Arthur did not exist, ‘what will happen to Avalon? What will happen to the sword in the stone?’ He has already acknowledged that ‘Some of these things are true and some of them lies’, but his repeated questioning tone here suggests that he is distressed by the proposed exclusions from ‘historical’ narrative. He is ultimately concerned that without the central figure of Arthur, the other figures around him might also be excluded: Avalon and the sword in the stone may be denied too. In his concern for ‘what will happen’ to Avalon and to the sword in the stone without Arthur, Gregory also seems to believe that they still might really exist, but that Arthur will no longer inhabit Avalon, or pull the sword from the stone. His belief in the ‘good stories’—whether true or lies—is not influenced by their central focus being potentially undermined. The narrative in which Arthur pulls the sword from the stone (whether historically, or in the anticipated future when he returns) is simply too attractive for Gregory to accept its erasure. Also, contradictorily, he even continues to believe in Arthur (‘Gregory says no, he is wrong’) because he remains committed to these ‘good stories’. His faith in history, then, is inextricably linked to his commitment to narrative. This is a very neat—and self-referential—analogy for the neo-historical contradiction: despite the fact that these narratives are *known* to be ‘not true’, to be fictionalised products

of the present moment and of postmodern deconstructions of history, we still invest in narrative as a means to access them.

Hilary Mantel makes some useful comments in the ‘About the Author’ section that concludes the 2010 Fourth Estate edition of *Wolf Hall*. Obviously, we should be careful not to overinvest in Mantel’s words here. They too cannot be relied upon to convey some dependable ‘truth’ about her authorial perspective, nor does that perspective attain any especially privileged position in its interpretation of *Wolf Hall* as a text. However, as a paratext that offers valuable potential for exploring how the neo-historical aesthetic might be defined, and helping to introduce this integral concept to my thesis, Mantel here has a lot to offer. She productively identifies this challenging contradiction between accepting postmodern theories of history and simultaneously resisting their implications for narrative. She writes:

[...] I am holding up my hands and saying to readers, you might think that what I’m doing in this book is dubious—it might even be thought reprehensible—yet we can’t help but reimagine the past; we have no choice. It is part of us, and we must acknowledge that it is *we* who reimagine it, we in the present moment, who can’t help but project our own insights and preoccupations backwards.

I think this creates a responsibility for the writer. I feel research must be as good as I can possibly make it, and guesses should be made only where there are no facts to be had. They must be plausible. Where gaps occur, the way you fill them must offer a possible version. I owe these characters as much scholarship as I can contrive, and all my care to try to get them right. (Mantel 2010: end matter 7; original emphasis)

This offers a helpful lens for interpreting Gregory’s crisis in response to changing ideas about history. In the first paragraph, Mantel implicitly acknowledges that she is writing after postmodernism, and the impact of this is that ‘we must acknowledge that it is *we* who reimagine it, we in the present moment’. Thus—as I have discussed—‘our own insights and preoccupations’ inevitably inflect the way in which that history is produced. Interesting here is Mantel’s evident sense that this position, which, as we have seen, is knowingly present throughout *Wolf Hall*, is one that she needs to defend, concerned that she may receive disapprobation from readers for her ‘dubious’ and ‘reprehensible’ interferences in history. (Her fears of disapprobation certainly seem to be belied by the gushing reviews mentioned above.) The repetition of the word ‘reimagine’ in this paragraph is also telling; although Mantel does not say this directly, she implicitly

acknowledges that *any* narrative representation of the past requires a certain process of ‘imagining’. Thus, when she ‘reimagines’, she is engaging in a repetitive—‘re’—process of dissecting and reforming previous imaginings. That ‘re’ also reveals much about the iterative process of the neo-historical aesthetic. I will consider this in detail in chapter three, which is on the haunting ontological uncertainties and ghostly, chronologically-resistant structure of the neo-historical aesthetic. Considering Derrida’s (2006: 10) analysis of the inevitable *returns* of the *revenant*, that chapter explores how the ‘re’ is a useful linguistic device for expressing the neo-historical aesthetic’s combining of present, future, and past.

Mantel, however, is writing in a post-postmodern moment, not a postmodern one, as chapter one will show, and the nature of the post-postmodern neo-historical contradiction means that she cannot simply accept this projection of self onto historical narrative. As this thesis (and especially my first, second, and third chapters) will demonstrate, this deconstructive process is the method of historiographic metafiction, in which narrators persistently acknowledge where historical inquiry and narrative inevitably fail them. At different points, I will consider John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987), and Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) and explore how their narratives emphasise the distance of the historical settings, the impossibility of accessing those settings, and/or draw explicit attention to those places where their own subjective, authorial impact upon the narrativisation of the past can be seen.

However, although I will demonstrate that the two are linked, *Wolf Hall* is a neo-historical text, rather than a historiographic metafictional one. As I have suggested, in the first paragraph of the quotation above, Mantel demonstrates a postmodern awareness of her own influence on the histories she writes. However, in the second paragraph she is troubled by an insistence upon narrative coherence and plausibility, and her perceived ‘responsibility’ to accuracy. The complicated relationship to plausibility in the neo-historical aesthetic will be discussed further in my third and fourth chapters, on ghosts and on technology respectively. The idea of a responsibility to accuracy, and the way Mantel characterises her work of ‘filling the gaps’ in history, recalls much recent historical fiction criticism that has sought to understand the way the past is represented and narrated in contemporary fiction (e.g. King 2005). I will examine this in detail in chapter two, on Sarah Waters and the middlebrow. In that chapter, I also consider Waters’s writing of middlebrow, fictional lesbian histories, which work to ‘fill the gaps’ of heteropatriarchal

canonical history (as Wallace argues women have been doing for centuries) by prioritising those voices that have been excluded from it. There is a contradiction in Mantel's words here—and it is one which speaks to an inherently neo-historical internal conflict—between the acceptance of a postmodern position, recognising the limitations to accessing history in narrative, and the desire to still formulate narrative—which, of course, Mantel does in *Wolf Hall*.

Mantel's self-contradictory conflict seems to extend yet further in this second paragraph of the quotation, when she writes that 'I feel research must be as good as I can possibly make it, and guesses should be made only where there are no facts to be had'. Here, her previous apparent awareness of her own subject position in relation to history collapses, and she fails to acknowledge that in accessing 'facts' she is inevitably limited by both her perspective and the text/s through which these 'facts' are understood. She mentions later (in the 'About the Book' section), her work with primary sources such as Cromwell's letters and diaries, and others' letters and descriptions of him. She even discusses an incident that I will discuss in more detail in chapter one, when George Cavendish finds Cromwell crying. 'Everyone who has written about Cromwell' uses this story as a source, says Mantel. In the original source text, Cavendish accepts Cromwell's explanation for his tears: 'I am like to lose all that I have toiled for all the days of my life'. Mantel (2010: end matter 13) argues that 'Historians inquire no further. As a novelist, I ask if people cry for just one reason', and like everyone else 'who has written about Cromwell', Mantel offers her own, tellingly different interpretation of these events. In Mantel's (2010: 155) novelistic version of this scene, there is a long build-up of tears to Cavendish's arrival, as Cromwell studies his wife's prayer book, weeping and meditating on her and his daughters' deaths. According to Mantel, Cromwell's tears are more complicated, have more emotional depth, than in their previous incarnations and representations, because she has the novelist's capacity for imagination, rather than the historian's commitment to fact: 'I notice the date; it's early November, it's the time of year when dead souls slide through the barrier from the next world into this' (Mantel 2010: end matter 13). The way in which she articulates this is knowing, treating the ghostly, spiritual world as not just historical but present-day fact.

Mantel's references to ghosts, here, are linked to her sense of herself as a kind of resurrectionist-medium. This is an image which recurs in her work and which has been considered by Rosario Arias (2014) and Wolfgang Funk (2013), among others. Mantel (2010: end matter 7) writes:

[...] it's immensely rewarding to feel that you have, perhaps, succeeded in reanimating someone. There is a kind of magic moment where you feel your characters are really speaking, and you don't have to think about their dialogue any more. I found that very early in the book, particularly with Thomas Wolsey. As soon as he began to speak, I felt that my job was simply to take down what he said, like a secretary. There is a peculiar pleasure to be had in feeling that you've brought someone back to life in that way.

That she reads the dead as 'speaking through' her is connected to themes and images in her novels *Fludd* (1989) and *Beyond Black* (2005), which address returns of the dead and mediumship, and in her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003), which is full of ghostly, haunting figures. As a vision of a novelistic methodology, this 'speaking through' is fascinating in a neo-historical context, given the evident impossibility, after postmodernism, of reading these dead 'voices' as uninflected by the medium-author through whom they speak. That Wolsey could be read as literally speaking for himself through Mantel resists contemporary critiques of the idea that it is possible or desirable to speak 'for' the past, or, indeed, speaking for the (marginalised) 'other' in any respect. (Gayatri Spivak's [1988] work is, of course, seminal in this regard.) While this thesis does not, regrettably, have the capacity to consider the postcolonial implications of this, the idea of directly channelling the voices of the no longer living does come up briefly in chapter three, on ghosts, with reference to Stephen Greenblatt's (1988: 1) 'desire to speak with the dead' as a New Historicist critical tool.

At the very least, Mantel, here and in the quotation above, demonstrates a problematic relationship to the imaginative process of writing history and historical fiction. Saying 'I owe these characters as much scholarship as I can contrive' positions that scholarship as directly and problematically contrary to the 'acknowledge[ment] that it is *we* who reimagine [the past], we in the present moment, who can't help but project our own insights and preoccupations backwards'. Her use of the word 'contrive' invokes an unacknowledged, perhaps even unaware, suggestion that there is a process of imagining, of *contriving*, even in the apparently factual, non-interventionist, non-interpretive 'scholarship' that she is now insisting is necessary for describing historical characters.

Mantel's perspective, and Gregory's above, have a lot in common, in the way they struggle to articulate an awareness of the potential fictionality of history, the imaginative and interpretive impact of the author upon historical narratives, and the pleasure to be found in coherent narrative form, particularly in relation to telling stories about the past.

Mantel's need to fill 'gaps' with a 'possible version' of history recalls Gregory's concern about what will happen to the sword if Arthur's absence leaves an unfilled 'gap' in his understanding of history. His acceptance of the imagined natures of these histories—"Some of these things are true", he says, "some not"—fits neatly with Mantel's 'it is *we* who reimagine it', especially when read in conjunction with his emphasis on an understanding of the stories of Arthur for his present moment. The idea that 'our king takes his descent from this Arthur' runs alongside and acts as evidence for Mantel's argument that we 'can't help but project our own insights and preoccupations backwards', even if, as discussed above, Gregory also freely acknowledges the implausible and imaginary nature of narratives about 'this Arthur'. Gregory commits to his history, projecting his present onto it, even when he knows its flaws and limitations. Mantel and Gregory, then, are intertextually acting as our neo-historicists, both knowing that historical narrative is impossible, inevitably imagined in the present, but insisting upon it, and its coherence, all the same. The conflict between these two positions is an inescapable part of the neo-historical aesthetic; on the one hand, there is a radical deconstruction of narrative as a reliable means for accessing the past, and on the other hand, there is an ongoing commitment to narrative as offering a, perhaps different, fictional kind of 'truth'.

### **Thesis structure**

As I have implied over the course of this introduction, the chapters of this thesis will each take a theme or form of the neo-historical aesthetic and explore how it manifests the aesthetic and what its critical and cultural position is within post-postmodern discourse. Chapter one considers post-postmodernism and authenticity, chapter two the middlebrow and Sarah Waters, chapter three haunting and spectrality, and chapter four steampunk and contemporary technology. I will begin, in chapter one, with an analysis of what post-postmodernism is, by considering theorists of postmodernism and of history, such as Fredric Jameson, Mary Poovey, and Hayden White, alongside the work of theorists working on contemporary culture, such as Peter Boxall, Rosi Braidotti, and Jeffrey T. Nealon. Interpreting Jameson's late capitalism as having developed into a kind of *ongoing* twenty-first-century neoliberal (post-late) capitalism, I propose that, alongside a Fukuyaman 'end of history' mentality, this has resulted in a simultaneous embracing and rejection of postmodernism. I argue that this is post-postmodern. Analysing contemporary cultural phenomena, such as the Instagram community #liveauthentic and its concordant commodification and translation of the idea of 'authenticity', alongside

neo-historical texts such as Emma Donoghue's *Life Mask* (2004) and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), I argue that neo-historical anachronisms position these texts as being manifestations of that self-contradictory post-postmodernism and its relationship to the process of 'doing' history in narrative. Extending my analysis of Thomas Cromwell in *Wolf Hall* illuminates this further, alongside a recognition of other work done in this field by Elodie Rousselot, whose work is parallel to, but in many ways quite different from, my own.

Chapter two, on Sarah Waters's middlebrowness, argues that the middlebrow is the cultural location of this conflicted, post-postmodern relationship to history, as Waters's own novels demonstrate. I consider how *The Night Watch* (2006) and *The Paying Guests* (2014) participate in the middlebrow, with particular attention to their accessible readability (what I call Waters's 'literariness') and their representations of the middle class. I argue, however, that the novels also explicitly use this middlebrow position to problematise the kinds of 'truth' that might be accessed through narrative. Defining the middlebrow with reference to Beth Driscoll's recent work on 'the new literary middlebrow' and Nicola Humble's work on the middlebrow of the 1920s, I consider the gendered implications of these neo-historical manifestations, as Waters writes imagined histories for lesbians that are, ultimately, problematically constrained by conservative discourses and dyadically-coupled 'happy endings'. A consideration of Lauren Berlant's 'intimate publics'—in relation to the middlebrow representation of women's shared reading in *The Paying Guests*—extends this interpretation of the middlebrow as similarly self-contradictory, offering a radical literary space for a kind of fictional, feminised history, but also circumscribing that history to a certain, conservative narrative and political position.

Chapter three is on the fraught and challenging structure of haunting, which I argue is at the heart of the post-postmodern neo-historical aesthetic. Using Jacques Derrida's theories of spectrality, I argue that haunting's chronologically resistant structure is a useful metaphor and critical tool for understanding the way in which the neo-historical aesthetic, and post-postmodernism more generally, work to bring together a postmodern and a pre-postmodern relationship to narrative and history, resisting the normative linearity of standard chronology. Analysing neo-historical ghost narratives such as Michelle Paver's novel *Dark Matter* (2010), and films *The Others* (dir. Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) and *The Awakening* (dir. Nick Murphy, 2011), I argue that their direct representations of ghosts and haunting manifest these achronological conflicts, and demonstrate that the neo-

historical aesthetic relies on a space of ontological uncertainty—using Derrida’s and Peter Buse and Andrew Stott’s work on this—in which the boundaries of the real and the not-real are no longer sharply defined. This is how history is produced through fiction in the post-postmodern moment. Considering Derridean haunted language in greater detail, I go on to discuss how ‘trace’ meanings in explicit neo-historical anachronisms act as a kind of ‘haunted language’, in which inevitable present-day interpretations, of words such as ‘queer’ in Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) or proleptic ironies in *Wolf Hall*, are always conspicuously, hauntingly present. I conclude this chapter with a gesture outward towards the wider political potential of this achronological haunted structure, with a consideration of how it connects to the works of Valerie Rohy and Elizabeth Freeman on non-linear queer time.

The fourth chapter of the thesis, on literary steampunk and its representations of technology, reads steampunk texts including Gail Carriger’s *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009-2012) and Cherie Priest’s *Boneshaker* (2009) as functioning at the extreme end of the neo-historical aesthetic. This is thus a slightly different approach to that in previous chapters; I here contemplate the possible limits of the neo-historical process. Contrasting the extremity of the neo-historical aesthetic in steampunk representations of technology with a more measured neo-historical example—Gail Jones’s *Sixty Lights* (2004)—reveals a resistance, in steampunk, to the spectrality that I identified in the previous chapter, and especially the ways in which the spectral metaphor might be linked to technology-related anxieties about disembodiment. Using Sherry Turkle’s and Jaron Lanier’s reactionary analyses of contemporary technology, I consider how concerns such as theirs about artificial intelligence, interpersonal dissociation, and concordant spectralisation as a result of technology, are dramatised and conservatively resolved in implausible steampunk technologies.

Overall, then, this thesis argues that the neo-historical aesthetic does not work to produce obsessively postmodern-aware narratives of history (such as those in historiographic metafiction); it does not constantly critique and acknowledge its own lacunas and influences, nor is it a complete deconstruction of the concept of narrative as providing any ‘true’ meaning about history. Instead, the neo-historical aesthetic works to formulate new, fictional histories that recognise their own problematically constructed narratives, but continue to function as fictionalised, haunted narratives nonetheless. This post-postmodern self-contradiction takes place in the middlebrow, and is haunted and persistently ontologically uncertain, spectralising to a degree that produces certain



anxieties when the neo-historical aesthetic is pushed to its extremes. The texts in which the neo-historical aesthetic appears, to varying degrees, imagine pasts and commit to narrative, even as they recognise the impossibility of historical truth. As Cromwell says in *Wolf Hall*, ‘Gregory, those Merlin stories you read—we are going to write some more’ (Mantel 2010: 280). This is what the neo-historical aesthetic does: taking histories and historical fictions—the Merlin stories—and imagining new and alternative versions of them, expanding the scope of canonical history in narrative, while simultaneously acknowledging the emphatically fictional nature of this process.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> These measures of success have much relevance to my discussions in chapter two, on the neo-historical middlebrow. Newspaper critics and literary prizes are two of the major institutions of the middlebrow in the twenty-first century.
- <sup>2</sup> The end matter of the 2010 Fourth Estate edition of *Wolf Hall* is renumbered from p.1 after the end of the novel at p.653. I will refer to this as ‘end matter’ and the page number.
- <sup>3</sup> Wallace (2013: 6) also alerts us to the fact that the publication date of *Waverley* is not straightforward, with Scott positioning the introduction as being written in 1805, when the actual publication date was nine years later.

## **Chapter one**

### **‘Part of the project of that book was not to be authentic’: The neo-historical aesthetic and post-postmodernism in contemporary historical fiction**

Mr Fields did concede that spinning wheels were not often used outdoors, at the foot of a slave’s cabin, but countered that while authenticity was their watchword, the dimensions of the room forced certain concessions.

Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (2016: 110)

This quotation from Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016) draws out some of the key aspects of the neo-historical aesthetic that will be articulated and analysed in this chapter. The novel will be explained in more detail below, but at this point, a museum’s white director condescendingly ‘concedes’ to a black woman who was previously enslaved that he may have made some errors in his reproduction of a plantation for an exhibition. However, ‘while authenticity was their watchword’ in constructing the exhibition, the constraints of capacity—the size of the room here acting as a metaphor for Mr Fields’s limited understanding of his own privilege and ignorance—lead to his belief that an accurate portrayal is simply not possible. This is a profound metaphor for the post-postmodern functioning of the neo-historical aesthetic. The neo-historical aesthetic proposes a new way of doing history in fiction, after postmodernism’s deconstruction of the belief in narrative as an unmediated means of transmitting accurate information. This chapter will articulate this new, post-postmodern context, in which ‘authenticity’ has become a term of cultural positioning, but in which the neo-historical aesthetic enables a redefinition of what is ‘authentic’ when historical narrative is no longer reliable. There are indeed, inevitably, ‘certain concessions’ in this, but, unlike Mr Fields’s wilful ignorance, the neo-historical aesthetic does attempt to acknowledge the limitations of a contemporary narrative about the past.

This chapter establishes a working definition of the ‘neo-historical aesthetic’, locating it in its relevant cultural and economic, post-postmodern contexts. It begins with an analysis of those contexts, articulating the circumstances of the present day in relation to postmodernism’s deconstruction—and disengagement—of the concepts of history and narrative. This entails an analysis of theoretical works of postmodernism and post-postmodernism. The basic argument here and throughout the chapter, both with and against Jeffrey T. Nealon (2012) in particular, is that post-postmodernism is integrally self-

contradictory, accepting and building on the basic tenets of postmodernism but also regressively seeking to return to a period before it. The neo-historical aesthetic is thus a response to this self-contradiction, a manifestation of it, in which the possibility of ‘doing’ history through narrative is persistently deconstructed in historical fictional texts, but this takes place *in* coherently structured narratives. This thus proposes a new way of doing history for the post-postmodern moment; a method that simultaneously incorporates and rejects postmodernist deconstruction of narrative. The chapter goes on to elucidate this through some specific examples: a key way in which the neo-historical aesthetic becomes textually apparent is in the anachronisms that recur in different ways in a range of twenty-first-century historical fictions. To illuminate this, I will consider Emma Donoghue’s *Life Mask* (2004) and its conspicuous uses of anachronisms.

The word ‘authenticity’ is again relevant here, offering a cultural touchstone, in its varying potential interpretations—accuracy in the context of historical fiction, resistance to consumer culture in social media—to link the neo-historical aesthetic to the wider world in which it is situated. Instagram’s #liveauthentic, for example, is a valuable intertext for the neo-historical aesthetic, in which new definitions of ‘authenticity’ are being developed and contested. Sarah Banet-Weiser’s linking of authenticity to brand culture is productive in this context, and my analysis of #liveauthentic develops through this lens of post-postmodern commodity culture and the perceived resistance to it. These direct contradictions recur throughout the chapter, diagnosing an element of post-postmodern culture and the neo-historical aesthetic’s mediation of it. The next section of the chapter thus directly addresses the self-contradictory conflict between the neo-historical aesthetic’s resistance to and valorisation of narrative, via its postmodern generic antecedent, historiographic metafiction. Defining the latter offers new ways of understanding the flexibility and variability of the former through Sarah Waters’s novel *Fingersmith* (2002)—an importantly dual narrative—and Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* (2013)—a novel that is much less committed to narrative coherence than many other neo-historical texts. The neo-historical aesthetic can be *variably* present, to different degrees in different contexts, but it always offers a new way of doing history for the post-postmodern context.

The next section of the chapter proposes other ways in which the neo-historical aesthetic is visibly identifiable in texts and how these different manifestations of it suggest a fraught and contradictory relationship to narrative—and historical narrative in particular—in the twenty-first century. This section addresses *Wolf Hall* (2009) and the

ways in which it describes this challenging, post-postmodernist relationship to history and narrative, via the ironically narrative-resistant figure of Thomas Cromwell. These discussions are then supported by, and in disagreement with, other current fields of research in contemporary historical fiction. Elodie Rousselot is another literary critic/theorist currently deploying the term ‘neo-historical’, and, by articulating the numerous ways that our arguments intersect and diverge, I further develop my analysis. Rousselot’s commitment to ‘verisimilitude’ and belief that ‘neo-historical fiction’ seeks to convey ‘a surface image of the real’ proves to be incompatible with anachronisms that I identify in *The Underground Railroad*. In this chapter’s analysis of that novel, it becomes apparent that it is a far more explicit, and far more directly confrontational, post-postmodern cultural product than Rousselot’s verisimilitude allows for.

This chapter argues that the post-postmodern condition is self-contradictory, accepting postmodernism while simultaneously seeking to return to a non-specific moment before it. The neo-historical aesthetic is just one manifestation of this, but it is a revealing one, in which the challenges—structural, political, and ethical—of doing history after postmodernism are confronted in fiction and, in a paradoxical and problematic way, partly resolved.

### **Neo-historical contradictions and the post-postmodern**

Central to my articulation of the neo-historical aesthetic will be its response to the complexities of the current post-postmodern moment, which this section of the chapter will articulate. Post-postmodernism’s self-contradictions are, in part, caused by the *ongoing* nature of what Fredric Jameson called ‘late capitalism’. I will begin by defining my terms—why ‘post-postmodernism’?—which leads to a discussion of what ‘postmodernism’ is/was (via Jameson) in order to understand why we might be considered to be ‘post’ it, and what postmodern views of *history* might suggest about post-postmodern historicising. Hayden White’s postmodern interpretation of historical narrative and its inherent fictionality is useful here and can be set alongside a brief discussion of Francis Fukuyama’s emphatic arguments for the ‘end of history’. Jeffrey T. Nealon’s definitions of post-postmodernism interact—although do not always agree—with my own; Matthew D’Ancona’s view of ‘post-truth’ and Rosi Braidotti’s of the new ‘grand narratives’ of the twenty-first century both articulate relevant contemporary conditions. These work together to inform my definition of the self-contradictory contemporary moment as it

relates to the equally self-contradictory historical narrativisation that takes place in the neo-historical aesthetic.

With that in mind, it is important to emphasise that the challenges of articulating—and indeed historicising—that contemporary moment are multiple. A number of theorists have produced terms that seek to articulate some of the circumstances that have been produced by the twenty-first century. Lee Konstantinou (2013: 410) is one of several people to helpfully list a whole range of options: globalisation, cosmodernism, metamodernism, altermodernism, digimodernism, performatism, postpositivist realism, the New Sincerity, the contemporary. I here give just a small selection of a huge number of possible terms; they clearly demonstrate the breadth of apparent referents for defining the present, from modifications of a previous moment (modernism becomes cosmodernism, metamodernism), to emphasis on the digital (digimodernism), and from suggestions of mood or ethics (postpositivist realism, the New Sincerity), to periodisation (the contemporary). This wide range goes at least some way towards expressing the problematic of attempting to define a moment that is still in process, or what Peter Boxall (2013: 2) refers to as the ‘illegibility of the present’. That said, features of the present, however indistinct, do come into focus in certain locations, and the neo-historical aesthetic is one such field. In it, we can come to recognise a set of present-day conditions, under which that aesthetic has been produced and to which it responds.

Of all the terms that have been used to refer to the present, I have followed Jeffrey T. Nealon’s (2012) work by using ‘post-postmodernism’. This is partly because as Brian McHale (2015: 176-177; original emphasis) puts it (with reference to Nealon’s use of ‘post-postmodern’):

Its very ugliness has some strategic value [...] since it prevents us from seeing the phenomenon it refers to as some shiny new cultural artifact, and forces us to recognize the ways in which post-postmodernism *repeats*, albeit with a difference, the postmodernism that came before.

This begins to summarise Nealon’s overall thesis and the aspects of it that will be useful to my articulation of the present; Nealon (2012: 49) himself writes that post-postmodernism is not an ‘outright overcoming of postmodernism. Rather, post-postmodernism marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism (which in its turn was of course a historical mutation and intensification of certain tendencies within modernism)’. His argument is that the cultural conditions that we currently inhabit do not resist postmodernism, so much as reiterate and re-emphasise it, developing it for a

different, twenty-first-century moment. Indeed, he emphasises that ‘Insofar as postmodernism was supposed to signal the end of modernism’s fetish of the “new”, strictly speaking, nothing can come after or “post-” postmodernism, which ushered in the never-ending end of everything (painting, philosophy, the novel, love, irony, whatever)’ (Nealon 2012: 49). Postmodernism, he here argues, was literally not supposed to have another ‘post’; it was supposed to be the final moment of cultural development. Evidently, to articulate the present, post-postmodern moment, it is necessary to consider what postmodernism is in general—and in the case of my arguments around neo-historicism, how being ‘after’ postmodernism might influence a changed relationship to history in the twenty-first century.

Fredric Jameson (1991: 3; original emphasis) situates postmodernism as the product of late capitalism: ‘every position on postmodernism in culture—whether apologia or stigmatisation—is also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today’. ‘Today’ here refers to the 1980s and early 1990s, when Jameson’s seminal theorisation of postmodernism and late capitalism—synonymous with ‘multinational capitalism’ in this quotation—identified a development into a unique cultural and economic context. That ‘nature of multinational capitalism’, he argued, had multiple significant manifestations, all of which were fundamental to understanding the ‘contemporary’, including: new forms of business organisation; new degrees of corporate internationalisation (such as in the exploitation of labour in certain countries to support the multinational dominance of capital by others); ‘a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking’ (i.e. rapid speculation in the stock market); new media, and particularly the impact of those new media on cultural production and the subsequent dissemination of capitalist values; and the impact of computers on mass production, and with this the turnover of products: ‘the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation’ (Jameson 1991: xix, 4-5). This list could go on, as Jameson’s view is that these structural conditions of late capitalism seep into many aspects of life and culture, but this brief summary gives a sense of the wide range of economic conditions that he saw as being the cornerstone of how and why the postmodern occurred in the form that it did. Jameson’s emphasis on the new is interesting in the context of Nealon’s comments above that postmodernism was supposed to signal the *end* of modernism’s fascination with the new,

and this is indicative of some of the internal contradictions that are integral to the structure of postmodern thought. We might read postmodernism as in some ways resistant to this late-capitalist fetishisation of high aesthetic turnover and the rapid turnover of goods, but it is also the product of it. The contradictory, late-capitalist form of postmodernism is particularly relevant in its relationship to history and how conceptualisations of history were influenced by this ‘late-capitalist moment’.

Jameson—rather than other theorists of postmodernism—is central to my argument that the neo-historical aesthetic is a post-postmodern development, partly because he placed heavy emphasis on how history came to be understood in this ‘late capitalism’. His postmodern interpretation of history and historicisation informs the neo-historical aesthetic in its fraught relationship to historical knowledge:

It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place. In that case, it either ‘expresses’ some deeper irrepressible historical impulse (in however distorted a fashion) or effectively ‘represses’ and diverts it, depending on the side of the ambiguity you happen to favor. (Jameson 1991: ix)

Again, we see an internal contradiction here, this time between the apparently dichotomous poles of expression and repression of historical impulses. In other words, integral to postmodernism is a need to historicise, but this exists within an irresolvable internal conflict, in which the ‘historical’ has become an impossibility. This is because of, as Peter Boxall (2013: 57) rephrases it, ‘the loosening of the bonds that attach historical narrative to material event’. Jameson (1991: 286) argues that even given this ‘eclipse of historicity’ at the same time: ‘we also universally diagnose contemporary culture as irredeemably historicist’. As we saw above, Jameson is profoundly critical of this late capitalism, and he is equally troubled by its concordantly fraught relationship to historicity (‘irredeemably’).

It is worth noting here that Konstantinou (2013: 413) in his review of Nealon’s *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012) alerts us to Nealon’s over-commitment to the academy as the site of post-postmodernism, and suggests that Nealon problematically reifies Jameson’s accounts of postmodernism. This criticism has some merit, though the basic tenets of Nealon’s theories remain convincing, and have much broader applications than Konstantinou suggests. That said, I am also keen to avoid such a reification of Jameson in my own use of his arguments. His theories are bold and multifarious, shifting through individual texts in detail, and across a range of different

cultural products, and they changed over time. As such it would be a methodological error to treat his works as standardised instantiations of a specific, unchanging perspective. Rather, I read these quotations from *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), and the other Jameson texts that arise in my discussion, as offering a particular momentary, necessarily fragmentary, and often performatively postmodern response to a certain historical and cultural moment.

Jameson also (elsewhere; 1984a: 76) articulates that ‘the writer’s relationship to history’ in postmodernism is ‘no longer dominated by static ideas of representation or of some “vision of history” in which a given artist is supposed to “believe”’. He suggests that this has been replaced by ‘a libidinal investment in the past—indeed [...] a libidinal historicism’. This invokes an irresolvable internal conflict in postmodernism, and results in that ‘loosening of the bonds’ between narrative and event identified by Boxall in postmodern historical thinking. That the ‘vision of history’ produced by an author/artist is no longer either static or intended to be ‘believed’ indicates the shift in the relationship to the past in text. This disjunction of the past and narrative can be further understood through the works of others, such as Hayden White (1975) and Patricia Waugh (1984), who followed Roland Barthes in arguing that narrative can produce a new reality—rather than just keeping a record of it—and emphasising that this has a meaningful impact on what ‘history’ even is. Waugh (1984: 50), for example, writes that postmodern metafictionalises emphasise ‘the fictionality of the plots of history’, and Peter Boxall (2013: 51), in defining this postmodern (il)logic, describes it as ‘the failure of the distinction between fiction and history’. In asserting this, theorists of postmodernism essentially destabilised the congruence of narrative with reliable and comprehensible ‘truth’, suggesting instead that narrative is invariably discursively unreliable.

This was not an entirely new idea, however, as the links between history and fictionality were longstanding, even to the extent that the historiographic process itself had long been inextricably bound up with fiction. Mary Poovey (1998: 218) writes usefully on the complexity of the word ‘conjecture’ in the context of history, arguing that the word has had, sometimes simultaneously, two opposed meanings, both ‘a mode of generating knowledge considered legitimate because it respects current epistemological conventions’ and ‘irresponsible speculation’. Poovey demonstrates that these two kinds of conjecture—contextually appropriate knowledge generation and ethically dubious guesswork—are bound up with early methods of ‘doing’ history. These methods were, to varying degrees, kinds of conjecture about the past, in which some parts were fictionalised and others were



based more closely on what was then known about the pasts in question, and they thus have much in common with how the postmodernists saw history and fiction. As Kate Mitchell (2010: 15) paraphrases Hayden White, historians in the eighteenth century:

saw their task as discovering the meaning of past events, and this meaning might best surface through a combination of what actually happened—what is generally considered ‘fact’—and what could have happened—details lost to the historical record but which do not obviously contradict it.

In other words, ‘history’ used to be a kind of historical fiction, in its various kinds of conjecture.

However, through the nineteenth century—as White makes clear—there was a process of organising and disciplining knowledge, and thus developing history into a kind of ‘science’, in which speculative conjecture and explicit fictionalisation were seen as making a text inadequately rigorous. White (1975: 21; original emphasis) also emphasises, however, that:

simply because history is *not* a science, or is at best a protoscience with specifically determinable non-scientific elements in its constitution, the very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge itself which have ideological implications for attempts to understand ‘the present’ [...] the very claim to have distinguished a past from a present world of social thought and praxis, and to have determined the formal coherence of that past world, *implies* a conception of the form that knowledge of the present world also must take, insofar as it is *continuous* with that past world.

White here emphasises that to articulate a version of the past, in history, was also to articulate an assumption that the present *could understand* that past, because doing so assumed that the present and past were in some way continuously connected and therefore mutually comprehensible. This forms part of a postmodern expression of the view that historical narratives, even those that were ‘factual’ in their efforts to narrate the past, were inextricably tied up with a set of assumptions about both that past and the present. The logical conclusion of this became that telling any kind of story about the past must therefore be unreliable because of the flawed nature of this assumption of continuity. This effectively constituted one part of a recognition that narrative as a whole was an unreliable medium—due to the inevitable influence of the subject position of the

author of that narrative—and that this had serious implications for the relationship, in the present, to a potentially entirely unknowable past.

The reasons for the shift in the historical imaginary and the awareness of the fictionality of narrative are manifold. Jameson (1985: 125) argues that ‘our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, [it] has begun to live in a perpetual present’ (this consideration is via Jacques Lacan’s definition of schizophrenia as a language disorder). Jameson views this as the product of a broader social unravelling, in which the 1970s/1980s sought to break from tradition, where previous social formations had sought to preserve it. This also links to Jean-François Lyotard’s contemporaneous work on ‘grand narratives’ about the past and present—the ‘myths’ or ‘metanarratives’ that he saw as having (often unknowingly) been the legitimising forces behind dominant cultures. Deconstructing the very principle of these grand narratives, Lyotard (1984: xxiv, xxiv-xxv) viewed postmodernism, in its simplest form, as defined by an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’, questioning ‘where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?’ Again, then, we here see a traditional form of power and knowledge production, via institutional and ideological forms of knowing—and the narratives through which they are legitimised—which is then destabilised by a postmodern ‘crisis of narratives’ (Lyotard 1984: xxiii). So this resistance to tradition, and to an overarching, unified view of the past, is a key element of postmodernism, and thus of the historical context to which post-postmodernism responds, and, for my purposes, so does the neo-historical aesthetic.

There are other influences on the ways in which the post-postmodern relationship to history has developed. Francis Fukuyama is another key referent here. He declared in 1989 (initially, and then more fully in his 1992 book) that the ‘triumph’ of liberal democracy over hereditary monarchy, fascism, and, most recently and pointedly, communism, had produced the ‘end of history’. In a profoundly ironic and audacious effort to create a new grand narrative of contemporary political circumstances, he argued that this social democratic state was the ultimate end-point of political and historical discourse. This, he said, was because liberal democracy—in its ‘perfect’ form as a principle—lacked any internal contradictions, unlike communism and other political formations, and thus it would never collapse. He was not insisting that events would cease to happen (as the ‘end of history’ might be read to mean), but that a historiographically articulated narrative of progress would no longer be relevant.

The controversial phrase ‘the end of history’ was taken up both in support of and in profound resistance to Fukuyama’s valorisation of capitalist and social democratic structures (see Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* [1993], for example, which is discussed in more detail in my chapter on ghosts). The phrase gained remarkable traction not just in rearticulations of Fukuyama’s neo-conservative theory, but also more broadly, as useful terminology for articulating an anxiety about the late-twentieth-century moment, whether this anxiety was manifested by adopting the principle of ‘the end of history’, or resisting it. This work is thus positioned in a different location to Jameson’s suspicious and diagnostic critique of the limitations of the postmodern moment and its ‘late-capitalist’ terms of production. Fukuyama celebrates the ‘triumphs’ of late-twentieth-century capitalism. He sees a conclusion and end-point here, where we could read Jameson as pursuing a move beyond late-capitalist discourse—perhaps even seeking a kind of post-postmodernism.

Linking the postmodern ideas I have discussed here—narrative has been destabilised and we have reached the ‘end of history’—it becomes possible to suggest that Fukuyama’s controversial phrase, if nothing else, revealed a key product of postmodernism: if history was all just narrative, then history *could end*. Postmodern thought and theories extend far beyond those I have here outlined, but I have established that there was a fundamentally changed relationship to ‘history’ and narrative in the late twentieth century. This was, in part, related to the contemporary political and economic conditions, whether the consumer power of late capitalism, or the perceived dominance of liberal democracy. In the specific contexts relevant to the neo-historical aesthetic, however, we also need to consider what came *after* the ‘end of history’. This is the transition into what I argue is a post-postmodern moment that both accepts the postmodern destabilisation of reliable historical narrative and simultaneously resists it. I will now move on to an interpretation of what, then, post-postmodernism *is*.

Jeffrey Nealon very explicitly draws his thesis on post-postmodernism out of Jameson’s on postmodernism; he echoes Jameson’s analysis in both structure and content, even seeking equivalents for Jameson’s original analytic subjects (e.g. echoing Jameson’s [1991: 39-44] work on the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles with an analysis of Caesar’s Palace Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas [Nealon 2012: 29-32]). Nealon argues that the circumstances of the present, and the first two decades of the twenty-first century, pose a problem for Jameson’s ‘late capitalism’. Capitalism not only persists beyond Jameson’s original field of view, but, in its twenty-first-century neoliberal form, commodity culture

has intensified; Nealon calls this ‘just-in-time capitalism’. This is one of the reasons he sees post-postmodernism not as something that comes *after* postmodernism, so much as something that builds upon it. Konstantinou (2013: 413-414) is troubled by this structure, suggesting that: ‘Capitalism has yet to disappear or weaken, which by Jameson’s account implies that we should be just as postmodern as we were before’. I would rather be inclined to argue that postmodernism was connected to a very specifically *late* capitalism, but that even that concept of ‘late’ relied on a problematic historicisation of the moment in question. Jameson both saw it as the apogee of a certain capitalist historical trajectory—a historical telos, perhaps, despite the grand narrative implications of this—and as a discrete period, historicised and historically separate. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick raises some of these contradictions in Jameson’s (1981: ix) work, not least in his injunction to ‘Always historicise’. Sedgwick (2003: 125; original emphasis) writes: ‘*Always* historicize? What could have less to do with historicizing than the commanding atemporal adverb “always”?’ This awareness of issues with Jameson’s representation of historicity in postmodernism, helps to avoid a reification of his work. I rather read it as indicative of a certain aspect of the postmodern condition; one in which the tension between the need to historicise and the anxiety about history/narrative—and the lack thereof—are apparent in the self-contradictorily narrative-reliant phrase ‘late capitalism’, and in the troubling atemporality of ‘always’. Now, capitalism *persists* and intensifies under an increasingly globalised neoliberalism, and we are, as such, paradoxical *post*-late capitalists. These are the different conditions of *post*-postmodernism, the reasons that we are not ‘just as postmodern as we were before’, because the temporal trajectory promised by ‘late’ capitalism was revealed to be merely a stage on a longer course. As Nealon (2012: 15) sardonically puts it: ‘In fact, the neo-Marxist hope inscribed in the phrase “late capitalism” seems a kind of cruel joke in the world of globalization (“late for what?”)’.

As Nealon’s work explores, this post-postmodern response to being located in a post-late-capitalist moment is manifested in a range of cultural products. He writes, for example, on the revival of the 1980s in the twenty-first century, discussing the presence of 1980s music, fashion, and visual culture—he gives specific examples, such as American singer-songwriter Iron and Wine’s cover of a New Order song, and various advertisements that have used 1980s music (Nealon 2012: 2). (Nealon’s work even precedes the escalation of this 1980s fascination, such as with recent TV series like *Stranger Things* [2016-2017], in which a whole range of 1980s film and television culture is reimaged and explicitly referenced in a very popular form.) Nealon posits this 1980s

revival as related to the cyclical presence of neoliberal capitalism, brought into sharp focus by the global financial crash of 2008. This, he convincingly argues, was a moment at which a different economic future may have seemed briefly possible, before the bailout of the banks proved that this would not be the beginning of a ‘brave new socialism’ of state regulation, with punishment of banks’ speculative investments. Rather, this turned out to signify a return to the previous state of free-market capitalism (Nealon 2012: 2). This, Nealon suggests, gave a sense that the free-market logic of the 1980s was ever-present, which produced a revival of the cultural forms that went alongside it, but in newly developed versions. Nealon (2012: 3) here references reality television, suggesting that competitive shows like *Survivor*, in which a group of strangers seek to sustain themselves in remote locations as they vote each other out of the game, ‘can be dubbed “reality” television only if we’re willing to admit that reality has become nothing other than a series of outtakes from an endless corporate training exercise’. Overall, this is a convincing argument, in which the economic and political circumstances of the first and second decades of the twenty-first century produce a cultural nostalgia, which revisits the aesthetics and cultural manifestations of a previous period that is retrospectively understood to represent a similar set of political and economic circumstances. Indeed, these are the circumstances that have produced the neo-historical aesthetic, similarly, although more generally, preoccupied with the past and how it can be brought into the present.

However, what is not entirely clear from Nealon’s analysis is how exactly this 1980s revival represents an *intensification* of postmodernism. That *Survivor* is a corporatised manifestation of the 1980s ‘greed is good’ culture is entirely plausible, and it is true to say that present-day consumerism—and indeed 1980s revivals—are extremely visible in contemporary culture, but it is unclear here how this extends or builds on postmodernist discourse or cultural products. Iron and Wine’s cover of ‘Love Vigilantes’ certainly revisits a 1980s song, producing it in a different, acoustic musical style, but it is unclear why this is explicitly a ‘post-postmodern cover’, as Nealon (2012: 2) calls it. Instead of focusing exclusively on 1980s revivals—although they clearly are hugely popular—I would argue that another ‘post’ here becomes relevant for a slightly different definition of what post-postmodernism is: ‘post-truth’, Oxford English Dictionary’s ‘Word of the Year’ in 2016 (D’Ancona 2017: 8). Matthew D’Ancona offers a helpful trajectory of the development of the concept of post-truth (here oversimplified), with origins in Nixon and Reagan, progressing through Tony Blair’s ongoing denial that the Iraq War dossier was ‘sexed up’,

to the mysterious £350 million a week that would be spent on the NHS after Brexit, and, of course, finally to its ultimate champion in the form of Donald Trump and the ‘alternative facts’ discourse that has characterised his time in US Presidential office so far. D’Ancona’s text is a fascinating and deeply problematic one, not least for its oddly pre-postmodern implicit reliance on the idea that there is some underlying and coherent ‘truth’ that late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century politicians have positioned themselves against: ‘Honesty and accuracy are no longer assigned the highest priority in political exchange’, he complains, implying a nostalgia for an unspecified past time in which ‘honesty and accuracy’ were at the heart of political discourse (D’Ancona 2017: 8). However, D’Ancona does usefully note and explore a number of different occasions on which politicians have *explicitly*, and with no apparent consequences, insisted that ‘truth’, of any kind, is no longer relevant in the political arena. A recent academic event at the London School of Economics debated whether such a ‘post-truth’ culture is, in fact, the inevitable result of the problematisation of ‘truth’ under postmodernism. There was a clear moral framework to the way the discussion was primarily established, as the event title was: ‘Is Postmodernism to Blame for Our Post-Truth World?’ (LSE 2017)

Both the neo-historical aesthetic and ‘post-truth’ are part of this post-postmodern moment—whether we read postmodernism as ‘to blame’ or not, its impact is evident—in which what we understand as ‘true’, whether about the present or the past, is no longer straightforward. This is partly why our understanding of historical trajectories has become scrambled. That much is conveyed in the name ‘neo-historical’ in which the new is paradoxically tied with the old/historical, indicating a temporal collapse, a resistance to demonstrably flawed linearities—and I will analyse the implications of this in chapter three, on ghosts. I would argue that the ‘neo’ of neoliberalism also proves relevant to my use of ‘neo-historical’; it enacts a periodisation of its own, placing neoliberalism into a historical trajectory in relation to liberalism, but this prefix also links the neo-historical to this specifically neoliberal moment. Jameson (1991: 18) in fact refers to ‘the increasing primacy of the “neo” in contemporary culture’, and literary critic Elodie Rousselot (2014: 3) writes: ‘For Jameson, this pervasive presence of the “neo” is symptomatic of the fact that “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past”, a process which leads to the “random cannibalization” of previous historical forms and styles’. Again, we might question whether the contemporary consumption and reproduction of the 1980s is in any way different from this ‘random cannibalisation’—and thus how it is post-postmodern rather than postmodern. It is significant, of course, that the ‘neo’ that

Jameson raises is part of postmodernism for him, and it is part of Rousselot's own argument that what she calls 'neo-historical fiction' is a postmodern genre in the twenty-first century. I will engage more completely with Rousselot's overall argument below, but my thesis in this chapter will primarily demonstrate that rather than 'cannibalization' (i.e. rather than the postmodern present 'eating' and reproducing the past), the post-postmodern neo-historical aesthetic actually participates in a complex and self-contradictory trajectory of both accepting the tenets of postmodernism's redefinition of history in narrative, but also of reasserting a need to do so in narrative. In this sense, the neo-historical may be, in some ways, conservatively reactionary *against* postmodernism, trying to repair its perceived mistakes in dislocating narrative so completely. However, it is clearly fundamentally committed to the tenets of postmodernism as well; this is another of the contradictions at play in the neo-historical. Peter Boxall (2013: 58) writes: 'To locate oneself "after" postmodernism is to orient oneself in relation to a phenomenon whose cultural power has rested to a considerable degree on its cancelling of the distinction between before and after'. To be 'post-postmodern', then, is integrally contradictory, that 'post' relying, fundamentally, on a principle of linear narrative time and truth that postmodernism itself has rejected. Post-postmodernism is therefore inevitably entailed in a simultaneous acceptance and rejection of postmodernism, and all of the contradictions that are inherent in that.

This is not to say that this contradictory post-postmodern acceptance and rejection is a conscious experience for the producers of culture; indeed, it would seem misguided (to say the least) to suggest that postmodernist *theory* would necessarily impact individuals in any specific way so as to produce a response to it, never mind an intensification of it, in post-postmodernism. Rather, this is to suggest that a collective response to those postmodern cultural products identified by Jameson, Waugh, Linda Hutcheon, and others can be located in another group of cultural artefacts from this later moment. As Rosi Braidotti (2005: 169) puts it:

At the end of postmodernism, in an era that experts fail to define in any meaningful manner because it swings between nostalgia and euphoria, in a political economy of fear and frenzy, new master-narratives have taken over. They look rather familiar: on the one hand the inevitability of market economies as the historically dominant form of human progress, and on the other biological essentialism, under the cover of 'the selfish gene' and new evolutionary biology and psychology.

While I am ambivalent about her definition of postmodernism as an interminable conflict between ‘nostalgia and euphoria’, Braidotti’s suggestion that the Lyotardian ‘master-narratives’ of history have returned is useful. It links to my discussion of post-late capitalism, emphasising that lack of change, or indeed intensification of economic conditions, has led to a profound sense of re-entrenchment of the same set of capitalist principles. In Braidotti’s view, this produces a certain biologically essentialist thinking in the contemporary moment. There is not space to discuss the latter here; I am focused on Braidotti’s underlying argument, not what the grand narratives *are* that have reasserted themselves, but more straightforwardly, just the *fact* that they *have*. Where Lyotard saw the collapse of grand narrative history in postmodernism—and this became part of the collapse of narrative more generally—we are seeing its revival in post-postmodernism. Braidotti (2005: 169) sees this as the consequence of a return of determinism, such as the neoliberal defence of ‘the superiority of capitalism’, but it is important not to underestimate the general problem that the loss of narratives—and historical narratives in particular—produces for consumers of culture.

This is where my argument deviates from Nealon’s, because I propose that, on some level, post-postmodernism is also reacting *against* postmodernism, self-contradictorily and simultaneously embracing *and* rejecting it. Although it is an oversimplification of his argument to limit it to one repeated quotation, his statement that ‘post-postmodernism marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism’ is an importantly productive one; he insists that ‘we’re looking at a mutation or evolution of paradigms rather than a simple return to the essentialist past’ (Nealon 2012: 54). I agree with this definition of the current moment, but a study of the neo-historical aesthetic, and its devoted commitment to *narrative*, reveals that this post-postmodern literary form also entails a rejection of postmodernism. This is a return to a non-specific (‘pre-postmodern’) earlier moment, before the ‘perpetual present’ stripped away the ability to rely on narratives—and grand narratives—as providing knowledge, legitimising power, and as having some coherent relationship to a broadly unarticulated sense of ‘truth’. We might see this post-postmodern neo-historical aesthetic as therefore in some ways resisting the post-truth terms of the present, but also accepting them, and accepting the flexibility of history in a post-postmodern context.

Why has this approach to history in fiction become so prevalent? Certainly, postmodernism exposed the fundamental limitations of canonical history—the grand narratives, but also the hegemonically structured and authored, and thus exclusionary,



versions of the past that have long constituted what we call ‘history’. This has opened a space for new fictional versions of the past, in which those past limitations can be resolved, such as the exclusions of women, people of non-normative sexualities and genders, and people of colour from the hegemonic, white, heteropatriarchal histories of power. These exclusions can be (sometimes problematically, or inadequately) responded to with new narratives about the past that *do* contain those voices. This writing of history in fiction has been the focus of some recent historical fiction criticism, such as Diana Wallace’s (2005) analysis of the longstanding process through which women have written their histories, marginalised from ‘factual’ history, in fiction instead (a reminder that this is not a uniquely post-postmodern process, but rather that postmodernism brought it into sharp focus). I consider a specific case of this in the next chapter, in my analysis of Sarah Waters’s fictional histories of lesbians. This is one reason for the neo-historical anachronisms that I will discuss below, with Emma Donoghue also producing lesbian histories in *Life Mask*, and Colson Whitehead in *The Underground Railroad* responding to an ongoing problem in the historicisation of race and racism. That these histories can, in some way, use fiction to reparatively respond to the violent marginalisations of canonical history is evidently true. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2003) theory of reparative reading may prove useful here, in which she proposes the pursuit of (readerly) pleasure as a counterpoint to what she reads as a destructive hermeneutics of suspicion. In a hermeneutics of suspicion, the (often queer) subject responds to the limitations of the world by expecting the repetition of exclusionary violence, whether literal or metaphorical, and thus anticipating the recurrence of such violence. Sedgwick (2003: 146) proposes reparative reading as an alternative methodology, in which ‘the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates’, seeking to focus on pleasure and positivity rather than suspicion. We can see analogies here for the neo-historical aesthetic, wherein readerly pleasure comes from a reparative relationship to the limitations of history, and from the organising structures of a commitment to coherent narrative.

However, as I implied above, there is another reparative, and in this case potentially reactionary, layer to this process, wherein the neo-historical aesthetic’s commitment to narrative works to imply that a certain sense of loss is also entailed in the stripping away of the reliability of narrative. While it may open productive gaps in history, insisting on the limitations of narrative for accessing the past also appears to produce a kind of anxiety. The neo-historical aesthetic seeks to resolve this, in attempting to produce a form that

both accepts the inevitable present-day influence on producing narrative *and* produces narrative anyway. In a sense, it conservatively seeks to render narrative reliable again. This also becomes relevant to my next chapter, which considers the middlebrow locus of the neo-historical aesthetic, and suggests that this need to return to narrative is a (sometimes conservative) middlebrow response to some of the more challenging aspects of historiographic metafiction. In this context, the value of accessible, readerly *pleasure* is not to be underestimated, as is at the heart of Sedgwick's reparative reading. Sedgwick (2003: 150) comments on the reasons for a historical misrecognition of reparative reading, given that 'The vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive towards a text or culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary'. These limitations are indeed problematic, and my work on the middlebrow shows how its focus on readerly pleasure has sometimes led to the marginalisation of middlebrow texts, because of assumptions that middlebrowness is apolitical. However, it is also important to acknowledge these ways in which such specifically neo-historical reparations can also be reactionary, seeking narrative certainty even as they acknowledge its impossibility. As with so many aspects of both the neo-historical aesthetic and post-postmodernism, it is contradictorily both at the same time, and often in the same action. We thus might also read this particular post-postmodern return as a conservative need to *resolve* some of the more challenging, and open-ended, aspects of postmodernism.

The remainder of this chapter will explore ways in which the neo-historical aesthetic is a response to these contexts and how it manifests the tense contradictions of the post-postmodern twenty-first century. In order to understand this, however, it is also necessary to explain how the neo-historical aesthetic is made visible (and why). One such visible marker of neo-historicism is conspicuous anachronisms in neo-historical texts.

### **Finding authenticity in anachronism**

In Emma Donoghue's 2004 (436; original emphasis) novel *Life Mask*, the twelfth Earl of Derby states:

'We've been told of the discovery of paltry caches of pikes and a few rusty muskets [belonging to the emerging working classes] but *no weapons of mass destruction*,' he spelled out a word at a time. 'Ours is a populace that has neither guns nor the skill to use them [...]'

At this moment in the novel, it is May 1794 and the recent revolution in France is causing unrest in Britain and panic amongst the lords of Pitt's government. Derby, one of the

lords opposed to Pitt, gives this speech in parliament, arguing: ‘My Lords, if you pass this Habeas Corpus Bill in a spirit of panic, you’ll be suspending [...] sacred liberty’ (Donoghue 2004: 436). The Habeas Corpus Suspension Act, which was passed in June 1794, the month after this fictionalised speech is set, suspended the right to a fair trial if the defendant was suspected of spreading unrest. ‘Fair trial’ has shifted in meaning over time, and clearly means something different now to in the eighteenth century. Despite this, Donoghue draws parallels between this political and legal shift in the eighteenth century and the politics of the early twenty-first century, when the novel was published. The striking phrase that she uses to draw these parallels, of course, is the conspicuously anachronistic ‘weapons of mass destruction’.

After the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US and under the heading of the ‘War on Terror’, both Britain and the US passed laws dictating that people suspected of terrorism could be detained without trial. The American Section 1021 (RT 2003) recommended this for anyone committing a ‘belligerent act’ and the UK Court of Appeal justified the ongoing use of the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act because there was a ‘state of emergency threatening the life of the nation’. The discussion around the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act in 1794 used similar terms. George III was reported to be concerned by ‘seditious practices’ amongst members of the British public and the debates in parliament around it aimed the bill specifically at ‘such persons as his majesty shall suspect are conspiring against his person and government’ (Parliament 1794: 1, 137). ‘Seditious practices’ and ‘belligerent acts’, while by no means the same thing, are both broad enough to incorporate a wide range of activities, and thus to permit the detention without trial of a huge range of people for many different reasons. The non-specific threats to the ‘life of the nation’ share a suggestive and inflammatory tone with ‘conspiring against his person and government’. With the nation’s and the king’s lives at risk, both acts and the debates around them use non-specific and vague language to imply that changes to the laws are reasonable, justifiable, and protecting.

The 1794 Suspension of Habeas Corpus Act and the 2001 Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act have evident similarities and were the products of analogous periods of political unrest and uncertainty, both in Britain and internationally. In using the anachronistic phrase ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in her eighteenth-century setting, Donoghue draws out similarities between two moments, vividly and simultaneously capturing both, despite the fact that the politics of the two periods are, in numerous ways, also very different. By ‘anachronism’, therefore, I mean a word, phrase, image, or politics

that is visibly incongruent in its setting—it has a particular meaning in the present that is relevant to the moment of writing, rather than the past in which the novel is set. Defining anachronisms in this way is not as simple as stating that a word or a phrase, or an idea or politics simply did not exist in the past (more on this with ‘queer’ in chapter three), it is more that its significance to the twenty-first century is visible and different from what it might have been in the past.

Most readers would see the phrase ‘weapons of mass destruction’ as referring to nuclear weaponry, which is already obviously anachronistic in an eighteenth-century context. It also had specific associations at the moment of the book’s publication (2004), connoting the justification by both the Blair and the Bush administrations for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and Hans Blix’s 2003 speech declaring that the threat of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in Iraq had been overstated—in their investigations, the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission had ‘not found any such weapons’ (Blix 2003). ‘Weapons of mass destruction’, therefore, is a phrase that has a very specific twenty-first-century meaning, and a meaning that is very obviously not applicable to the eighteenth century. Here, the contemporary understanding of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ represents an anachronistic disruption to the narration of an imagined version of the past. Derby argues that despite scaremongering and panic amongst the aristocracy in Britain in 1794, the actual threat from ‘*the lower orders*’ (Donoghue 2004: 437; original emphasis) is minimal—that of the historically accurate ‘pikes and a few rusty muskets’ rather than the historically incongruous ‘weapons of mass destruction’.

Such anachronistic breaks from otherwise apparently canonical versions of the past—i.e. that broadly cohere with the past as it is most commonly represented—can lead to a text being considered ‘inauthentic’. However, the word ‘authentic’ has been used in a wide range of situations in recent years, including associations with food (clean eating, ‘authentic’ national cuisines), health (wellness, ‘natural’ therapies), advertising and brand logos (especially sportswear), tourism, and, as Steven Poole (2013) writes, ‘indie café[s] or Beyoncé’s lip-syncing [...] Even Marks & Spencer’s men’s underwear is branded “authentic”’. As such, a reinterpretation of it in the context of post-postmodern culture can offer a different perspective on the ‘authenticity’ of the neo-historical aesthetic and its anachronisms, and it is to this that I will now turn. Some of these uses of ‘authentic’ are longstanding, some are more recent, but (again, as Poole comments) the sheer breadth of potential applications of the term has recently become striking. In discussions of historical fiction, ‘authenticity’ also has many meanings, but is most commonly treated

as synonymous with ‘accuracy’, to imply that a narrative runs close to historical record and to events as we understand they happened in the past—hence the perceived *inauthenticity* of anachronisms. This is the case in the quotation from an interview with Sarah Waters in my title (Ciocia 2007: n.4). Waters argues that she had not intended for *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) to be ‘authentic’, meaning that she deliberately strayed from known historical record when creating her characters, settings, and story. She also comments elsewhere:

I think it’s amazing too, how much we do want our historical fiction to be authentic, even though it’s fiction. I know that myself. And you feel cheated if you then discover that they didn’t get it right, or they were manipulating things, even though it’s *all* a manipulation. We do have this tremendous investment in authenticity. (Dennis and Waters 2008: 48)

This clearly positions ‘authenticity’ in opposition to ‘inaccurate’ fiction, with that ‘even though’ suggesting that a more logical position would render the two fundamentally incompatible. This recalls D’Ancona’s concern for ‘honesty and accuracy’ in political discourse. Waters speaks usefully, here, of the emotional investment that becomes tied up in historical fiction, with readers ‘feeling cheated’ by inaccuracies—whether authorial errors or deliberate interventions. This recalls my discussion, in the introduction to the thesis, of Mantel’s (2010: end matter 7) fear that her neo-historical work would be thought ‘reprehensible’ by her readers. Nicola Parsons and Kate Mitchell also highlight the dismissive attitudes of critics of the early twentieth century, such as Leslie Stephen, who claimed that ‘the first and last thing to ask in judging an historical novel is whether it is in exact accord with the so-called facts of history’ (quotation by Bernbaum 1926, quoted in Mitchell and Parsons 2013: 2).

My arguments about readerly pleasure and the neo-historical aesthetic rely on an understanding that ‘accuracy’ and ‘authenticity’ do not mean the same thing. While ‘accuracy’ designates an adherence to known facts (again, the ‘so-called facts of history’), as Waters means in her use of ‘authenticity’, the latter is actually a broader and more complex term (see also Mitchell and Parsons 2013: 7). Diana Wallace (2005: x) writes that ‘On a [...] popular level, historical fictions are often judged on their perceived “authenticity”, not only whether they get their “facts” right, but also whether they are imaginatively “true” to their period’. The first part of her argument relies on the meaning of ‘authentic’ as factually *accurate*, but the second part—that a novel should remain ‘true’ to its period—complicates ‘authenticity’. Wallace’s text is focused on women’s historical

fictions of the twentieth century, so there is evidently a disparity between the period she is describing here and my post-postmodern one, but her theories about what was happening in historical fiction in the twentieth century set the stage for the neo-historical aesthetic that follows it. She argues that a historical novel is expected to not elaborately expand beyond what we think and feel about a period, even within the fictions that the narrative creates. But the neo-historical aesthetic does exactly this. It pushes beyond the boundaries of what we know or think is ‘true’ about the past in order to invent new histories.

Jerome de Groot (2013: 58) writes:

If the past is other, artificially located in a binary relationship with now, its representation—particularly its fictional recreation—invokes numerous ethical issues. The translation of the past into a recognizable, readable present demands a set of procedures and assumptions that are particularly disconcerting, accruing around the illusion of authenticity.

This recalls Hayden White’s (1975: 21; original emphasis) arguments, quoted previously, and his suggestion that a narrative about the past, in any form, ‘*implies* a conception of the form that knowledge of the present world also must take, insofar as it is *continuous* with that past world’. De Groot, drawing on White and other postmodernists, articulates the fraught interactions of past, present, and future in fictional texts, drawing on the significance of *imagining* the past rather than suggesting that the process of writing historical fiction is an act of ‘uncovering’ or ‘telling’ the past. He articulates, as I do in my discussions of the neo-historical aesthetic, the impact of postmodernist understandings of history—such as that articulated by White—on how we think and do history, and history in fiction, in the present day. In this quotation, de Groot draws important attention to the ethics of historical fiction, the problem, raised by authors as well as critics,<sup>1</sup> of whether there is a ‘responsibility’ to report the past accurately—or as accurately as possible given a postmodern recognition of the impossibility of being *entirely* accurate. De Groot and I use the term ‘authenticity’ differently (a difference between our perspectives which will recur in the thesis). He suggests that the ‘illusion of authenticity’ is the attempt to (perhaps unethically) insist that the past as narrated in historical fiction is *not* other, *not* different from the present, as implied by its conversion through narrative into something accessible in the present day. As my analysis of the *neo*-historical will indicate, however, anachronisms offer a means to identify and insist upon that ‘illusion of authenticity’—

which I just call ‘authenticity’. Anachronisms are the means by which the neo-historical aesthetic acknowledges the *discontinuities* of past and present knowledges.

Jeremy Tambling (2010: 5-6) makes a similar argument to de Groot, but puts it differently, when he argues that:

Historical reconstruction means that to describe events or places, [the authors of histories or historical fictions] must use terms unrecognisable to the people in those [historical] situations. If history is what happened, and what we say happened, the first only knowable through the second, history can only be anachronistic.

That ‘and what we say happened’ is important, acknowledging and expressing that whatever ‘really’ happened is functionally unknowable and inarticulable without narrative. It is true that all historical fiction (and all history) is inevitably the product of a different moment to the period in which it is set, and—as White expresses—it attempts to use *narrative* to package the past for consumption in the present. This is the inevitable and unavoidable anachronism of writing any kind of history in or after postmodernism. Tambling (2010: 5) puts this succinctly: ‘Anachrony arises from the disparity between events and their narration’. In other words, anachronism is the difference between ‘the so-called facts of history’—what ‘really happened’—and the way that those facts are told in narrative. Anachronisms are an inherently post-postmodern literary device, drawing attention to the limitations of narrative and the distinction between the present narration and the events of the past that we will never be able to convey truly ‘accurately’.

Authors of historical fiction have commented on their struggles with the inevitable present-day influence on their writing and this need to make past-set narratives comprehensible to present-day readers. Hilary Mantel (2011) stated that in *Wolf Hall* her characters’ speech anachronistically strayed from historically accurate vernacular because using accurate speech from the sixteenth century would be alienating to readers. Instead, she sought to ‘shift language sideways’. Critics have not always observed the complexity of this, however; for example, Rachel Cooke (2009; original emphasis) wrote in *The Observer* that in *Wolf Hall* ‘The voice is so true: I have my suspicions that Hilary Mantel actually *is* Thomas Cromwell’. Even aside from this tongue-in-cheek assertion, it is evident that Cooke sees some kind of ‘success’ in Mantel’s ‘illusion of authenticity’, her medium-like transmission of Thomas Cromwell’s voice, when the *inaccuracy* of characters’ speech is actually part of the text’s ‘translation of the past into a recognizable and readable present’.

The neo-historical impulse is different from the cognitive and linguistic anachronisms to which Tambling, de Groot, and Mantel refer—the inevitable anachronisms that arise when narratively packaging the past for the present. Rather, a neo-historical aesthetic recognises and engages with these anachronistic assumptions, making (at least some of) them explicit. Again, de Groot’s ‘illusion of authenticity’ to which the historical novel aspires is different in this *neo*-historical context. Here, narratives are differently ‘authentic’ because they use anachronisms to express this troubled and influenced process of constructing narrative.

In using anachronisms to be explicit about the influence—on both writer and reader—of the present when describing or reading about the past, Donoghue’s text critiques that assumption that we *can* reliably access the past through narrative, whether fictional or factual—and she draws attention to the inevitable anachrony of historically-set narratives. However, she also continues with her narrative, allowing the twenty-first century and the fictional seventeenth century to be simultaneously present. This is where the authenticity of the novel lies. It is a representation of the complications and impossibilities of historical narratives, but these paradoxically appear within a coherent narrative about the past. Neo-historical representations of the past are post-postmodern and thus differently authentic because they *acknowledge* this influence of the present in writing about the past and create new narratives through it.

This need to acknowledge the inevitable flaws in historical narrative—to recognise that Hilary Mantel is *not*, in fact, Thomas Cromwell—and that our narrations of the past are always going to be inflected by our present-day position, is the product of the deconstruction of history in postmodernism. Since ‘accurate’ narratives about the past became understood to be impossible, literature has sought to find different ways of articulating this. The neo-historical aesthetic is the post-postmodern version and my redefinition of ‘authenticity’ offers a useful means to interpret such developments. The next section will thus explore other manifestations of that authenticity in contemporary culture, and how these might continue to develop an interpretation of some features of post-postmodernism and its self-contradictoriness.

### **Redefining authenticity via #liveauthentic and the neo-historical aesthetic**

As suggested above, ‘authenticity’ is a challenging and useful word to use in a post-postmodern context; it has been subject to a range of shifts and changes of definition, and is currently being articulated and valued in new (though historically situated) ways.



‘Authenticity’ offers a productive link between the neo-historical aesthetic and the broader cultural and epistemological environments out of which it has grown. In this section of the chapter, then, I wish to identify and explore the implications of one such contemporary use of the term: the hashtag #liveauthentic, most prominently used on picture-sharing social media site Instagram. Users add #liveauthentic to the images they share, identifying them as representations of ‘authenticity’. I will analyse this current use of ‘authentic’, via Julia Straub’s definitions of the term, and the links that Sarah Banet-Weiser draws between contemporary ‘authenticity’ and consumer culture, alongside Instagram users’ own views of the hashtag. Through this analysis, I further identify some of the contradictions of this post-late-capitalist and post-postmodern moment with which neo-historical authenticity interacts, and to which it responds.

Images tagged #liveauthentic tend to focus (although by no means exclusively) on healthy ‘localvore’ food consumption, nature and dramatic views of natural beauty, homemade craft items, and vintage and antique products. Although, that said, as is part of the point of this redefinition of authenticity in the present moment, these focuses are subject to change—one week there may be a proliferation of images of waterfalls, another week it will be portraits, pizzas, or a shifting combination of many things. #liveauthentic, in this sense, is persistently in flux, and my arguments about it are underpinned by an awareness of this potential for the community to shift. When marked by the #liveauthentic hashtag, these cultural images and items are usually reproduced in artistically composed photographs, with a precise focus and short depth of field, and they often use Instagram filters to create ‘vintage’ appearances. This sense that the images are ‘marked’ by the hashtag is an important one, gesturing towards the semiotic markers identified in Jonathan Culler’s (1988: 164) work on tourism, in which he demonstrates the mediation that takes place in the certification of something as ‘authentic’: ‘To be truly satisfying the sight needs to be certified, marked as authentic. Without these markers, it could not be experienced as authentic’. With such a huge range of image-content visible in the pictures that are posted, this ‘marker’ of the hashtag #liveauthentic becomes one of the only ways in which ‘authenticity’ can be experienced in these images at all. There are also sometimes very close similarities between not just the content of different images during any one phase, but also their artistic construction, the specific filters used, and even the way that objects are laid out for the composition of the photograph (see @SocalityBarbie and The Kinspiracy for critical and sarcastic demonstrations of this startlingly obvious homogeneity, even in spite of the range of subjects for the pictures).

To ‘live authentically’, some members of this online community seem to be saying, requires participation in some very specific cultural imagery—despite the breadth of potential applications of the term.

#liveauthentic is just one example of the potentiality of the term ‘authentic’ in the present moment, which, as I suggested above, has taken on a whole range of new roles, but it is evident that ‘authentic’ no longer has a coherent and solid meaning in the present day, when it can just as easily refer to a homemade hat, a mountainous view, a cityscape at night, or a child in a café. #liveauthentic is a productive and in some ways a representative example that illuminates both the breadth of and limitations on how ‘authentic’ is currently being used, as it is the product of a conflicted post-postmodern political and cultural experience. The relation here between this online community and an aesthetic of fiction is not specific—#liveauthentic is a set of carefully controlled photographic representations of wealthy lifestyle aesthetics, and as such, it does not focus on literature in any explicit way and vice versa—so much as it offers a set of linked conditions that identify a contemporary cultural and linguistic shift. The analogy I am drawing between #liveauthentic and the neo-historical aesthetic is therefore an emphatically loose one, but one that draws important links (and acknowledges difference, even as it suggests a set of points of congruence between the two).

In *Paradoxes of Authenticity*, Julia Straub (2012: 11-12) writes of ‘authenticity as something that is performed or “done”, or even as a bond between people, thus as something with a communal dimension’. This has a productive bearing on my discussion here, as explicitly stated definitions of the terminology of #liveauthentic are not easily located. This is partly because Instagram is a photo-sharing site. Other than hashtags that consist of a few words, and/or very short sections of text, Instagram communities rely on images rather than language. While, as discussed, there are similarities between some of the images, there is also a remarkably wide range of content. Evidently, then, this is a performative and community-based definition of authenticity, in which, by citing their images as part of #liveauthentic, individuals ‘do’ authenticity; the community is, as Straub puts it, bonded by their shared, if unarticulated, sense of what is appropriate to mark in this way. In ‘doing’ authenticity, it comes to mean, as Stephen Poole suggests above, a huge range of things, with few images that cannot be ‘made’ authentic through the application of ‘#liveauthentic’. That said, these images broadly carry associations with self-promoting lifestyle aesthetics, a way of projecting an idealised self to the world, and

specifically to the community, but one that is legitimised—at least to the community—by the performative action of the term ‘authentic’.

However, prevalent in articles and blog posts from members of the #liveauthentic community, is a defensiveness about their use of ‘authentic’ and how appropriate it is (Kelly 2014; Oliver 2015). Hilary Oliver (2015), for example, argues that there is ‘more to it’ than ‘a bunch of lumbersexual/neo-hippie lemmings, hoping that someone out there thinks we’re actually unique’. She is adamant that despite the easily replicated appearance of #liveauthentic images, they represent a ‘genuine longing for authenticity in our generation’. It is still difficult, from this, to determine exactly what she believes ‘authenticity’ means, but it is partly unpacked when she says:

I see a common thread: A desire for things with a story. Maybe it’s just what’s cool right now, but I think it’s something more. We’re tired of the generic. We crave things with a patina, the musty smell of something that’s well used because it’s beautiful and useful and lasting. Something classic. Something that has meaning. We’re tired of throwaway everything.

That this is ‘a desire for things with a story’ is revealing in relation to my comments above about the need, in post-postmodernism, to restore the sense of history that has been lost as a consequence of postmodernism. Oliver posits #liveauthentic participants as pursuing narrative in exactly the way I argue the neo-historical aesthetic does, as it attempts to reassert the power and potential of narrative. Jameson’s (1991: 18) ‘libidinal historicism’ is partly the product of consumer culture, and its impact on postmodern subjects, which, he argues, produces this pursuit of narrative and stories. This has been described as ‘a reduction of history to commodity, which allows one to create, sell, and buy the past as ordered’ (Thurschwell 2010: 245). We can see this libidinal investment in purchased commodities in this ‘craving’ to *own* objects with a ‘patina’, with a ‘story’. History has become a purchasable object in Oliver’s description. Oliver, however, proudly posing as a spokesperson for the #liveauthentic community, also works hard to emphasise what she sees as its political aspects. Ironically, she posits #liveauthentic in direct resistance to the contemporary consumer culture of the neoliberal post-postmodern moment, and identifies a generational exhaustion with the new, the modern, and the disposable.

Sarah Banet-Weiser’s *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012: 5) also argues that branded commodity culture has co-opted ‘authenticity’ in the twenty-first century, but she contradictorily insists that there is an underlying ‘power of authenticity—of the self, of experience, of relationships. It is a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical

age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves'. The contradictory nature of this is conspicuous, with Banet-Weiser apparently seeking to resist corporate co-option of authenticity *through* authenticity itself. However, she is evidently correct that 'authenticity', however people interpret it, as we see in #liveauthentic, continues to have value for people existing within the heavily branded context of the contemporary.

Banet-Weiser (2012: 4) writes of this impact of advertising on culture:

When that story [articulated by any brand advertising] is successful, it surpasses simple identification with just a tangible product; it becomes a story that is familiar, intimate, personal, a story with a unique history. Brands become the setting around which individuals weave their own stories, where individuals position themselves as the central character in the narrative of the brand [...]

This commitment to *stories* in consumer culture thus continues. Despite postmodern deconstructions of narrative as inevitably influenced by their production, there is evidently an ongoing commitment to those narratives—even when explicitly biased as in advertising—in the post-late-capitalist, post-postmodern context. Oliver's insistence on the old and the 'well-used' is an attempt to assert a different *kind* of material culture, one that is resistant to corporate monopolies and mass production and is instead focused on the reuse and consumption of 'vintage' objects. Modern things, she implies, do not have 'stories', but old, 'well used', 'lasting' objects with their 'musty patina' do. Stories, then, are what confer 'meaning', and thus authenticity onto objects. The irony here—and irony figures heavily in the post-postmodern context (see chapter three)—is that a glance at #liveauthentic reveals the overwhelming presence of consumer culture in the images shared and marked as #liveauthentic. However, this is a consumerism that, as Oliver's argument reveals, somehow self-righteously places itself outside the 'usual' consumer culture when the term 'authentic' is added to it. The process of adding an image to Instagram and tagging it #liveauthentic, of course, does not give it a 'story', nor does it make it any less disposable. Instagram is a fast-moving social media platform, and of the over 22 million images tagged #liveauthentic (in November 2017), the 'Top Posts' section changes daily and dramatically. Oliver's insistence that there is a 'desire for things with a story' demonstrates an urge to impose stories onto this platform, to insist upon the 'beautiful and useful and lasting' even in this disposably scrolling environment. (In one sense, of course, social media is not disposable: posts are recorded and kept by various

platforms, including Instagram. However, community and individual engagements with each image are comparatively brief.)

This is only one part of how the #liveauthentic community defines authenticity. Oliver herself even implicitly explores different aspects of the term in this same article, discussing, for example, the drive behind many #liveauthentic posts to position their images against mainstream fashion. Other authors have other ideas, such as Rachel Watson (2015), who suggests #liveauthentic offers an opportunity to ‘Be messy. Be nerdy. Sassy. Flawed. Just don’t be fake. Fake has become the ultimate character flaw’. As Banet-Weiser (2002: 3; original emphasis) puts it: ‘In the US, the twenty-first century is an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity, that we are governed by superficiality’. (The reference to the US highlights the parameters of Banet-Weiser’s arguments, but this quotation does also speak to a broader post-postmodern, twenty-first-century condition—at least relevant to the comparatively wealthy global north, i.e. the limited field of much of my own analysis.) Banet-Weiser identifies anxieties about authenticity as the very product of *inauthenticity*, suggesting that this is a source of ‘lamentation’ in our ‘superficial’ present. If Rachel Watson is right, #liveauthentic is also the product of resistance to *inauthenticity*—perhaps to being ‘fake’, or consumerist, or too ‘new’. #liveauthentic, profoundly ironically given the images’ focus on wealthy lifestyle aesthetics, thus coheres with Banet-Weiser’s articulation of resistance to inauthenticity in contemporary commodity culture. This recalls Paul de Man’s (1983: 214) comment that ‘to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic’, which would suggest that #liveauthentic’s resistance to *inauthenticity* is not the same as it having a legitimate *authenticity*. However, this would reject the possibility that authenticity is not just something to ‘be’, but also something to ‘do’, as per Julia Straub’s argument, and also that authenticity is what we *feel* to be authentic, as per Sarah Banet-Weiser’s. Following these theorists, and the manifestation of authenticity in #liveauthentic, reveals that ‘authenticity’ when defined by the community can be created by ‘doing’ or ‘feeling’ something that resists the ‘inauthentic’.

Oliver’s descriptions work hard to ignore the seemingly endless photographs of cups of coffee (often from disposable cups) and cityscapes that definitively do not emphasise the old nor do they resist disposable consumerism. Her efforts to politicise the hashtag seem at odds with the often apparently de-politicised emphasis in #liveauthentic photographs on these superficial lifestyle aesthetics that are still implicitly defined as ‘authentic’—and not inauthentic—by the hashtag (explicitly drawn out by

@SocalityBarbie). Images tagged with #liveauthentic can get thousands of Instagram 'likes', and are posted from all over the world; while English-speaking Europe and North America predictably do dominate, non-English-language countries are also present. In seeking to resist—if Oliver is correct, which she may be, for some parts of the community—globalised consumerism, #liveauthentic complicatedly also comes to valorise it, as Banet-Weiser's brand culture can help us to see. This reveals another profound contradiction at the heart of the post-postmodern moment, as with the simultaneous resistance and commitment to narrative in the neo-historical aesthetic.

Unlike Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2002: 5, 10) insistence that 'true' authenticity exists outside of the 'crassness of capital exchange' and is 'positioned and understood as outside the crass realm of the market', #liveauthentic is a very specifically post-postmodern manifestation of authenticity, one which simultaneously embraces and rejects its consumerist underpinnings. Having recognised a consumer culture of disposability that the community seeks to reject, the *way* in which this rejection takes place, through the engagement of huge numbers of people on social media, inevitably also incorporates that culture, repackaging the newly 'authentic'—whether an image of a lake or a meal made from organic vegetables—for global (disposable) consumption. The concept of authenticity, then, exposes this contradiction, and, as my analysis demonstrates, thereby also indicates the contradictions of the post-postmodern condition. These contradictions are in part the consequence of postmodernism itself. In order to elucidate this, and the impact of this in literature, the next section will look at a specific postmodern genre, historiographic metafiction, and its own relationship to history and narrative, to further explain what is unique about these post-postmodern developments, and what the neo-historical aesthetic is contradictorily both working with and against.

### **The literary form of the neo-historical aesthetic: Commitment to narrative**

The neo-historical aesthetic is not an entirely new move in historical fiction. As discussed, it relies on the deconstruction of history that occurred during postmodernism, and as such the postmodern genre of historiographic metafiction is its obvious precursor. This genre was identified by Linda Hutcheon (1989: 47, 50) as 'obsessed with how we come to know the past today', and in her analysis of it she references Jameson's (1984b: 53) argument that the postmodern moment demonstrated an obsessive 'repudiation of representation, a "revolutionary" break with the (repressive) ideology of storytelling generally'. In this section of the chapter, I will explore this postmodern precursor to the

neo-historical aesthetic in order to further establish what is *post*-postmodern about this new development in fictional historical narratives. It would be a naive oversimplification to suggest that there is a clear and distinct line between historiographic metafiction and the neo-historical aesthetic—they share many fundamental traits, not least in being responses to this ‘break with the (repressive) ideology of storytelling’, and in offering deconstructions of the process of accessing history through fiction. In this respect, the two have much in common, but there are differences too, which I will elucidate by exploring some examples: John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* (2013). Different postmodern novels and different historiographic metafictions manifest their postmodern origins in different ways, and my intention here is not to establish *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as emblematic of all postmodern fiction—although critics do often regard it as the archetype of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon 1989; Nicol 2009: 106-112). In future chapters, I will examine other examples of historiographic metafiction that manage their relationship to history and narrative quite differently from Fowles’s novel, such as Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987), discussed in chapter two, and Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), discussed in chapter three. In my analysis here, however, Fowles’s explicit deconstruction of narrative acts as a useful counterpoint to the neo-historical aesthetic’s valorisation of it.

Both historiographic metafiction and the neo-historical aesthetic demonstrate what Hutcheon defines as our obsession with how we can know the past, by making their readers persistently aware of the fictionality of the texts and of the irony and risks of attempting to access historical ‘truth’ through narrative. In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* the narrative voice is unreliable, persistently using words like ‘perhaps’ and ‘maybe’ to indicate the unknowability of the past setting to a present narrator. The narrator insists on the fictionality of the representation, commenting ‘these characters I create never existed outside my own mind’ (Fowles 1977: 85), and the novel resists narrative certainty and closure by having three potential endings, including one in which the narrator changes things around in order to provide a happier alternative.

This, then, is the postmodern, literary, generic context out of which the neo-historical aesthetic grew, but, of course, being post-postmodern, it manifests the unreliability of historical narrative somewhat differently, although with similarities. Differently from a narrative like *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, which constantly, self-referentially fails to be certain, in Donoghue’s neo-historical *Life Mask*, a third-person narrative states all events,

expressions, and experiences—including the anachronistic ones—with firm, impersonal confidence, in a linearly structured story. In different texts that differently manifest the neo-historical aesthetic, the type of narrative varies, but the overarching coherence does not. Each part of the events of the narrative is clear. Instead, the inevitable fictionality and unreliability of historical narrative is emphasised through anachronisms, as with ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and others (‘national security’; Donoghue 2004: 436) in *Life Mask*. This occurs without suggesting that anachronisms make *all* historical narrative impossible as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*’s uncertainties do, such as when the narrative voice seems unable to be sure of the events in the narrative, ‘There are tears in her eyes? She is too far away for me to tell’ (Fowles 1977: 398). In *Life Mask*, Donoghue’s anachronisms demonstrate that this (and all) history is not reliably accessible through stories about the past. Paradoxically, this takes place within a coherent and certain story. Thus, while the neo-historical aesthetic is in some ways the descendent of historiographic metafiction, as I have suggested, there are differences between them too. Understanding this, and recognising historiographic metafiction and the neo-historical aesthetic in their respective positions enables a clearer understanding of post-postmodernism, both as extending postmodernism—by further working within its deconstructions of narrative—but also returning to a moment before it—when narrative remained a dependable source of knowledge. This contradictory nature is how the neo-historical aesthetic can be identified as ‘authentically’ post-postmodern (as with #liveauthentic).

In reference to the difference between historiographic metafiction and recent historical fiction, Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons (2013: 13) argue that there is an ‘inadequacy of existing theoretical frameworks for accounting for the large number of contemporary historical novels that do seek to remember, represent, and imaginatively restore the past, rather than simply reflect on the problematics of such representations’. In response to this, critics such as Rosario Arias (2014: 20) and myself, have sought a framework to articulate this self-reflexive historical fictional action. However, Mitchell and Parsons actually create a false dichotomy; it is not as straightforward as a distinction between imagining the past and reflecting on the problematics of doing so—and, I would add, especially of doing so in narrative. Indeed, Mitchell (2010: 3) has argued elsewhere that historical fiction criticism has forced texts into either being self-reflexively analytic *or* critically naive. However, I will argue that it is the combining of this imagining with reflections upon its problems—of self-reflexive analysis and narrative naivety—that brings together the two parts of the dichotomy. Here we find the neo-historical aesthetic.



The literary form of the respective texts, then, is one place where differences between postmodernism and post-postmodernism can be located. Rather than demonstrating a complete break with the ‘repressive ideology of storytelling’, these neo-historical aesthetics use broadly *continuous*, rather than *discontinuous* narrative structures.<sup>2</sup> This is perhaps a regressive move, in which the retaliation against postmodernism is produced by an anxious (libidinal, according to Jameson) pursuit of a return to stories, a rejection of the challenging deconstructions of narrative in postmodernism, as I suggested was present in Oliver’s conception of #liveauthentic. It is, perhaps, a commitment, then, to the ‘repressive ideology of storytelling’. However, it is also a performative, productive action which seeks to create *new* narratives, often to reparatively restore those missing from exclusionary hegemonic histories. It emphasises that stories are not *exclusively* repressive, but rather they self-referentially might have the potential to exceed this repressive ideology, even as they, inevitably, participate in it. That the neo-historical narrative of *Life Mask* is coherent is not, however, to suggest such narratives are necessarily always straightforward. They often have unreliable narrators who push us to question the dependability of their versions of events. The distinction between the neo-historical aesthetic and historiographic metafiction is thus not a simple separation between the two. I will go on to demonstrate, however, that even within these unreliable storytellings, there is still a neo-historical valorisation of narrative.

Christian Gutleben (2001: 140) developed an early definition of what he called ‘retro-Victorian’ texts. These subsequently came to be called ‘neo-Victorian’, and I will argue in chapter three that they participate in the neo-historical aesthetic. In this early analysis, however, Gutleben argues that the novels ‘multiply[...] the narrative instances and hence points of view’ and thus make ‘obvious that each version of the facts is only compartmental: no narrator has a full knowledge of the events, each account represents only one in an infinite number of possibilities’. This interpretation suggests that they address the problem of storytelling via the same mode as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* in their resistance to narrative; he suggests that this results in a problematic disintegration of the narratives and a total failure of coherence. However, in Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002), for example (not one that Gutleben addresses directly, although he does analyse some of Waters’s other novels), this compartmentalisation actually marks a simultaneous resistance *and* commitment to narrative. Here, we have two narrators. The novel begins with narration by working-class Sue, who tells the story of her attempts, with the guidance of another character, Gentleman, to dupe a wealthy woman, Maud, and have her

committed to an asylum; the plan is for Sue and Gentleman to escape with Maud's fortune. An unexpected twist finds Sue incarcerated in the asylum, the narrative is taken over by Maud, and we return to the beginning of the story, revealing that Sue has been misled by Gentleman and Maud, and has thus made many mistakes in what she believed to be a true version of events. This fundamentally destabilises the narrative that we previously assumed was a reliable record of events. So the narrative of *Fingersmith* coheres very logically with Gutleben's argument: we are emphatically reminded that 'each version of the facts is only compartmental', and thus—in a broader postmodern sense—that no narrative, of any kind, can be assumed to be a reliable record of events. So far, so postmodern.

However, this is not where the novel ends. Via a series of complex twists and turns, with shifts of narrator between Sue and Maud, the novel ends with the two women, and thus our two narratives, united in a 'traditional', dyadically coupled romantic ending (see chapter two for further analysis of the troubling impact of Waters's 'happy endings'). Even with Gutleben's 'multiplication of points of view' reminding us that 'no narrator has a full knowledge of the events', the novel still offers an opportunity to combine a set of different narrative perspectives into one coherent one—by bringing our two narrators together. It is also a contrast to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and its multiple, uncertain endings 'He walks toward an imminent, self-given death? I think not' (Fowles 1977: 399). Indeed, even beyond this return to wholeness in narrative, Maud's undermining of Sue's initial story offers an opportunity to reconsider everything in the light of new information and effectively allowing us to re-interpret the whole text. Gutleben (2001: 140) argues that 'the different and sometimes contradictory visions and versions of the facts signal an essentially contingent and possibly unattainable conception of historical knowledge. The sense of a grand narrative or metanarrative is consequently absent', which is broadly accurate. (Although his sense that this takes place in 'a novelistic movement which aims at reconstituting a historical period' seems misguided—there is very conspicuously no 'reconstruction' here; rather, this is an attempt to explicitly *imagine* a past.) However, rather than allowing this engagement with the impossibility of historical narrative to force the structure of this fictional narrative to collapse—as in historiographic metafiction—we have a tightly wrought and coherent suspense narrative, in which multifarious narrative perspectives add to the tension and the twists, resulting in a narratively straightforward conclusion. This is self-contradictory, certainly; it resists the idea that any one narrative can offer a coherent and complete version of events, while it simultaneously constructs

convincing narratives; Waters thus insists upon historical *imagination* and reparative, readerly enjoyment in accessible narrative, while also resisting the idea that unmediated historical knowledge is possible. This is part of the post-postmodern context: these novels both step forward beyond, and regress to a moment before, postmodernism.

Temporally situating post-postmodernism, and thus the neo-historical aesthetic, in the present moment, however, is not necessarily to suggest that historiographic metafiction, as a genre, has vanished. In its contemporary manifestations, it has certain interactions with the neo-historical aesthetic. Some contemporary texts continue to offer complex engagements with the past, and with doing history, but they also persistently resist the continuous narrative structures of the neo-historical aesthetic. Kate Atkinson's historical novels offer a useful example of this, as with, for example, *Life After Life* and its sort-of-sequel—inasmuch as such a thing would even be possible for *Life After Life*—*A God in Ruins* (2015). Rather than flaunting a series of conspicuous anachronisms in a broadly coherent narrative, in order to demonstrate the problematics of attempting to narrate history, these two novels have challengingly non-straightforward narrative structures and stories. In *Life After Life*, protagonist Ursula is born and reborn on the same day, over and over again, living marginally different lives, of varying lengths, sometimes dying in childhood, sometimes in adulthood, but always getting another opportunity to live her life. This magic realist touch is striking. As Ursula gradually becomes, on some deep and unspoken level, aware of her own capacity to be reborn, she also becomes aware of her ability to change the life courses of those around her, which is important when her adulthood includes the Second World War, and the potential deaths of many people she loves. The relationship to history in this novel—and especially to personal histories as affected by wider events—is the product of a postmodern recognition of the problematic nature of narrative. Ursula is both liberated and constrained by narrative consequences in each of her lives, and, to return to the Jameson quotation above, the 'storytelling' that constrains her to narrative coherence is thus indeed 'repressive'. Similarly, Patricia Waugh (1984: 124) identifies in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the ways in which fictional narrative places restrictions on its characters, and suggests that the narrative voice of Fowles's novel 'reveals [protagonist Charles] to be apparently trapped within both the script of history and the script of the fiction we are reading'. Ursula's experiences are borne out by this, with the Second World War dictating the actions she must take, and the narrative of the novel creating a whole set of metafictional constraints upon her. This leads to the conclusion of the novel, in which she must sacrifice her own romantic happiness, which

she has experienced in another timeline, to save her brother's life (he is the protagonist of *A God in Ruins*). Each individual storytelling is in some way 'repressive', but the knowledge that Ursula can end her life and experience it again also releases her from that repression. Like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, this becomes problematic for the text as a whole, with Ursula's lives potentially having no possible end. The novel concludes with her dying yet again—this time it possibly could be final, but it is impossible to be sure.

*Life After Life* is difficult to categorise. It does not share in the neo-historical, regressive valorisation of narrative as a means to provide a unified version of events (even within unreliable and multiple narrations). *Life After Life* clearly does resist narrative, and history in general, as reliable determiners of 'what really happened'. One *Guardian* reviewer describes how, in *Life After Life*, 'the narrative starts again—and again and again—but each time it takes a different course, its details sometimes radically, sometimes marginally altered, its outcome utterly unpredictable' (Clark 2013). This unpredictability of the various outcomes of Ursula's lives, despite having seen various versions of them lived out in a number of ways, and the multiplicity of narrative options, suggest that the novel is a kind of historiographic metafiction—it is a *fundamental* break with that 'repressive ideology of storytelling', in that it does not offer any one, final version of events. Indeed, where *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ends three times, *Life After Life* potentially ends countless times, but 'starts again—and again and again' too. As Ursula puts it, 'The past was a jumble in her mind, not the straight line that it was for Pamela [her sister]' (Atkinson 2014: 99). (This could be evidence for Nealon's *intensification* of postmodernism in post-postmodernism.) This jumble that she learns to manage and manipulate demonstrates the novel's commitment to a non-linear and unreliable time structure.

However, because of the complex interaction of historiographic metafiction and the neo-historical aesthetic—with the lines between them always blurred and indistinct—*Life After Life* participates in certain aspects of the neo-historical aesthetic as well. This is a strength of the neo-historical aesthetic; unlike more strict generic boundaries, it can be partially observed in texts. So, for example, each version of Ursula's life *does* offer some kind of more traditional narrative coherence—with her progression over a number of different routes to the 'best' outcome, the one that saves her brother, Teddy. Plus, the omniscient narrator does not explicitly remind us of our present-day position in relation to Ursula's fictional historical one—unlike in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (and *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*), wherein the narrator informs us, for example, that protagonist Charles 'had not really understood Darwin. But then, neither had Darwin himself'

(Fowles, 1977: 47). Rather, the problems of narrating history are implicitly revealed by the endless repetition of narratives; Ursula's desperate need to 'fix' her past and ensure the best possible outcome is a powerful metaphor for the neo-historical pursuit of new, better narratives about the past, narratives that recognise their own limitations but are not inhibited by them. *Life After Life* is a profoundly challenging historical fictional text. It is a metafiction that participates, to a degree, in the neo-historical aesthetic. In some respects, this contradicts the arguments I have previously put forward, but in another—this sense that post-postmodernism is inherently self-contradictory—it furthers them. To elucidate this point, it will be useful to look at a more straightforward manifestation of the neo-historical aesthetic in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*.

### **Other manifestations of the neo-historical aesthetic: *Wolf Hall***

Straightforward narrative coherence is not the only aspect of literary form relevant to the neo-historical aesthetic (although it is true to say that it is a central part of its post-postmodernism). Hilary Mantel's in-depth narrative of Tudor life through the eyes of courtier Thomas Cromwell in *Wolf Hall* is unusually written in the present tense, and is full of uncertain indirect free style. It is broadly narrated from Cromwell's perspective, although this is sometimes unclear; Mantel's narrative is loosely in the third person (occasionally drifting into first), and rarely refers to Cromwell by name, much more commonly using only third person pronouns. This makes the boundary between omniscient narrator and Cromwell's own thoughts very uncertain. So, for example, the following paragraph:

It's not the hand of God kills our children. It's disease and hunger and war, rat-bites and bad air and the miasma from plague pits; it's bad harvests like the harvest this year and last year; it's careless nurses. He says to Wolsey, 'What age is the queen now?' (Mantel 2010: 82)

When we are informed that 'He says to Wolsey', there no absolutely clear referent for that 'He'. By process of elimination, it becomes clear that it must be Cromwell, but the absence of his name acts as a persistent reminder that this fictionalised history may or may not be filtered through his (fictional) perspective. The narrative voice (almost) never refers to 'I', but it does frequently refer to 'we' and 'our', such as in this same paragraph: '*our* children'. These collective first person pronouns bring in the reader to a collusive presence in the narrative, whilst also acting as powerful reminders of the impossibility of understanding in the present day—at least for the most common readership of the novels—the 'rat-

bites' and 'plague pits' that represent such dangers to 'our children's' health. This is reinforced, at times, by direct address to the reader: Henry 'is taking his gold plate, his linen, his pastry chefs and poultry-pickers and poison-taster, and he is even taking his own wine: which you might think is superfluous, but what do you know?' (Mantel 2010: 391). The reader is simultaneously included and distanced here—the direct address brings us in, while the combative 'what do you know?' distances us again. This represents the neo-historical aesthetic: the reader may believe they have an ability to know and understand the past through narrative, but they can never actually 'know' the history that the narrative is imagining. *Wolf Hall*, then, does not have a multiplicity of narrative perspectives, but it instead uses an omniscient narrative to persistently remind readers of the self-referentially neo-historical nature of the text.

There are other techniques that Mantel uses to undermine the power of narrative even as she insists upon it. As one reviewer put it: 'This is a narrative [...] spiced with sly contemporary references' (*Time Out* review quoted in Mantel 2010: v). These are not the emphatic anachronisms of 'weapons of mass destruction' but are still anachronistic nods to the reader, in an otherwise coherent and plausible historical narrative. They are the moments that remind us of the problematics of experiencing history through narrative even within a narrative set in the past: 'everything that comes to pass will pass by God's design, a design re-envisaged and redrawn, with helpful emendations, by the cardinal' (Mantel 2010: 28). At the height of Wolsey's power, we are reminded that grand narratives are modified by those who get to influence them. 'God's design' is one such grand narrative that asserted and maintained the legitimacy of the church in the sixteenth century; Wolsey is, in typically tongue-in-cheek fashion, here proposed as the powerful co-author of that same grand narrative. However, when Wolsey's power begins to diminish, 'It's hard to escape the feeling that this is a play, and the cardinal is in it: the Cardinal and his Attendants. And that it is a tragedy' (Mantel 2010: 51). Cromwell—for this is another occasion on which the narrative reflects Cromwell's own perspective without stating it—is subtly, but still metafictionally, aware of his own position within narrative, and of the storytelling impositions that this creates. Ironically, of course, this is the cardinal's tragedy, but the narrative shifts focus away from him and onto Cromwell's new adventures, and Wolsey thus ceases to be the protagonist (if he ever really was).

Plays figure heavily throughout the narrative, always with these 'sly contemporary references' reminding us that we are reading a fictionalised text, an artificially constructed narrative. Cromwell's family later playfully act out a distorted version of a supposedly true

narrative that has been told to them by Sir Henry Wyatt, in which he claimed he was rescued from a lion by his son. Of their performance the narrator (and indirectly, Cromwell) explains: 'It is not that the boys don't believe the lion tale; it is just that they like to put their own words to it' (Mantel 2010: 328). The boys seek to claim the narrative, to change it to suit their own narrative purposes. When Cromwell puts a stop to their performance, one of his adopted sons asks for Cromwell to tell them stories about his own past. 'I don't know if I should', he replies, 'You will make a play of it' (Mantel 2010: 328-329). There is a profound irony, in reading a narrative about Cromwell's (disputed, and minimally recorded) personal life—and these scenes of his family are among the most personal and private—in which he asserts his fear of being narrated, his anxiety that his story will be performed by someone else and in someone else's words. Of course, it is being narrated in someone else's words: Mantel's. At another point in the narrative: 'He is crying. He says to himself, let [his colleague] George Cavendish not come by and see me, and write it down and make it into a play' (Mantel 2010: 213). The even greater irony here is that George Cavendish *did*, in fact, write down an incident in which he saw Cromwell weeping, and this became a source text for Mantel's novel (Mantel 2010: end matter 13). These are not the explicitly anachronistic 'sly contemporary references'—or, indeed, less than sly!—of *Life Mask*, but are rather a deeply embedded interrogation of the problematic process of creating and imagining historical narrative, without fundamentally disrupting the coherence of Cromwell's story.

*Wolf Hall* self-contradictorily incorporates an awareness of the failures of narrative *within* a cohesively realist narrative about the past. Linda Anderson (1990: 132) argues that: 'realism and the ideology it supports can manage to occlude difference through its very gestures towards continuity, coherency and wholeness'. But the literary form of the neo-historical aesthetic is more complicated than this. Politically, it seeks *not* to occlude otherness, but instead to imagine histories that go beyond grand narratives of power and domination. And it self-referentially rejects narrative *in* coherent narrative. As these investigations into different relevant texts have demonstrated, this is where we see its inherent self-contradictory post-postmodernity.

Cromwell states: 'For hundreds of years the monks have held the pen, and what they have written is what we take to be our history, but I do not believe it really is. I believe they have suppressed the history they don't like, and written one that is favourable to Rome' (Mantel 2010: 219). We might think here of Walter Benjamin's (2015: 248) view that 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of

barbarism', in which he emphasised the Marxist, modernist view that to write history is to commit exclusionary acts of violence; history/historicism in this view means that 'Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate'. In *Wolf Hall*, this is a moment in which Thomas Cromwell, like Benjamin, appears to articulate a twentieth-century view of history, a modernist or postmodernist (a proto-postmodern?) awareness of the problems of power and narrative control in history. He expresses his frustration about the authorship—by those with a certain biased perspective, the Catholic church—of commonly-held 'true' history. As I suggested in my introduction, relationships to history and narrative were complex in the sixteenth century, and Cromwell's position here had obviously been articulated before the late twentieth century, in Benjamin and before. I therefore do not mean to suggest that it is exclusively postmodern in its anachronism. However, in the context of this carefully rendered contemporary take on a historical period, it inevitably draws our attention to the wider awareness, after postmodernism, of the unreliability of historical narrative, not least in its having been constructed by individuals with a certain perspective. Again, that revealing quotation from Hayden White proves useful: 'the very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge itself which have ideological implications for attempts to understand "the present"'. Those ideological implications, in this case, are the construction of a legitimating, barbaric grand narrative of 'Rome'.

Cromwell articulates the problem that *Wolf Hall*, as a text that participates in a neo-historical aesthetic, seeks to identify, and to persistently grapple with throughout: how can we interpret inevitably authorially-inflected narratives about the past? This is not a stark anachronism in the way that 'weapons of mass destruction' is, but it is nonetheless an important anachronistic nudge towards our present-day relationship to the very narrative we are reading, and to the uncertainties around power and 'grand narrative' history. This statement by Cromwell is heavy with a metafictional awareness of authorial presence, of the controlling narrative hand, but it is also plausible, it fits into the narrative with its doubleness, with simultaneously present/past meanings (and I will go into more detail on this 'doubleness' in my chapter on ghosts). It thus proposes a new way of *doing* historical narrative: explicitly and openly fictionalised, drawing attention to its postmodern deconstruction of narrative in general, but also still working through



narrative—perhaps regressively, as I suggested above, but thereby enacting the contradictions of the post-postmodern condition.

Peter Boxall (2013: 59, 64) writes of the twenty-first century's 'inheritance of a history which is no longer narratable', and suggests that:

Across the spectrum of contemporary writing, in historical novels, as well as in a range of other genres and styles of writing, one can see this struggle towards a historical realism that remains beyond the grasp of a narrative that is alive to its own limitations, a narrative that lives out the historical depletion of its own access to the real.

It is evident in *Wolf Hall* that there is a 'struggle towards historical realism', in that the narrative seeks to represent the Tudor period, and Cromwell in particular. It seeks to be a rich and powerful story about the past, about a historical moment. However, the challenging proto-postmodernist hints of a troubled relationship to narrative suggest that it is also 'alive to its own limitations', to the impossibility of 'accessing the real' through narrative. Boxall (2013: 66) offers a convincing reading of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001)—among other novels—in this context, as a text that has an 'ambiguous double narrative', which does not aim to 'perform the collapse of history into fiction, or to suggest that history itself is in some way fictional, but rather to test the relationship between narrative form and a historical "actuality" [...] to which narrative struggles and fails to bear adequate witness'. Thus, he suggests (unlike Jerome de Groot's [2016: 30-37] reading of it) that *Atonement* does not follow historiographic metafiction 'but rather works as a subtle corrective to it [...] some kind of repudiation of this tradition'. Here we begin to see where Boxall's account and my own diverge—not through disagreement, but through focus on a different kind of historical fictional response to the impact of postmodernism on contemporary methods of narrating history. Where *Atonement* is a repudiation of historiographic metafiction, the neo-historical aesthetic is instead intimately bound up with it, following on from it, occasionally resembling it, and building on it, whilst also (potentially nostalgically) returning to a moment before it. When Thomas Cromwell complains that 'for hundreds of years, the monks have held the pen of history' he follows in John Fowles's tradition, even as the novel's coherent narrative works to reassert history within that tradition. Boxall writes that *Atonement* 'does not fold history into fiction, but rather opens up a difficult gap between fiction and history'. *Wolf Hall* actually *does* fold history into fiction, as historiographic metafiction did, but it does so to simultaneously acknowledge and ignore the 'gap' between the assumed factuality of history and the

assumed ‘falseness’ of fiction (Boxall 2013: 67). This is a different kind of historical fiction to *Atonement*’s challengingly double narrative, not testing the boundaries between ‘narrative form and historical actuality’, but rather suggesting, in a perhaps rather conservative reaction against the effects of postmodernism on narrative, that it is possible to have something resembling both at the same time. The next section of this chapter will consider other contemporary literary manifestations of this, through the work of other critics who have also used the word ‘neo-historical’.

### **The term ‘neo-historical’**

Neo-historical anachronisms also occur in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*. The date of the novel’s setting is conspicuously unclear, but we are left to assume that, at the opening of the novel, we are somewhere before 1861, before the Civil War, in Georgia, in the southern United States. The novel begins with introductions to several women: Ajarry, abducted from West Africa and transported to America; her daughter, Mabel, a slave on the Randall plantation; and *her* daughter, Cora, who is the novel’s overall protagonist. Mabel, we learn from Cora’s perspective, has escaped the plantation, the only slave to have done so without being subsequently caught, and Cora, with her friend Caesar, seeks to do the same. The narrative of the novel follows Cora in her flight from the plantation through numerous further, profoundly traumatic and racist oppressions, across the southern states and into the north. In reality, in this period, desperately dangerous and fraught escapes such as these by people who had been held as slaves, were sometimes facilitated by what later came to be known as the ‘underground railroad’. This was an interconnected network of individuals and groups who helped (at great personal risk) previously enslaved people to escape to freedom. Cora indeed does use this underground railroad, but the novel has a major anachronistic twist:

At that, the bench rumbled. They hushed, and the rumbling became a sound. Lumbly led them to the edge of the platform. The thing arrived in its hulking strangeness. Caesar had seen trains in Virginia; Cora had only heard tell of the machines. It wasn’t what she envisioned. (Whitehead 2016: 69)

In Whitehead’s text, there is an actual underground railroad. This is a bold and challenging anachronism, literalising the metaphorical name, and giving physical presence to the complexity of the underground network of people and places that enabled escapees to get to freedom. The London Underground opened with steam trains running under the city in 1863, so the technology Whitehead describes is clearly anachronistic. However, even

without the pre-Civil War date, the scale of this railroad, and indeed its very existence, are clearly historically impossible fabrications. Cora is baffled by the scale of the physical enterprise of building a railway underground across the US, which works as a powerful metaphor for the work and the complexity of the ‘real’ underground railroad. As the book ends with Cora on another journey through the underground tunnels, to a completely unknown future, she is awestruck by:

The ones who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her. Who stood with all those other souls who took runaways into their homes, fed them, carried them north on their backs, died for them. The station masters and conductors and sympathizers. (Whitehead 2016: 303)

The railroad is one of many deliberately conspicuous anachronisms that permeate the text of *The Underground Railroad*, as Cora sees and experiences a whole range of traumas inflicted on people for their race across Europe and the US throughout the past 200 years. (There are also further technological and architectural anachronisms, such as the elevators and skyscrapers that long precede their actual development.) Examples are numerous, but I will here briefly discuss just a few. While in South Carolina, Cora learns of a programme in which doctors are deliberately allowing syphilis to progress in black male patients. Here, Whitehead is implicitly referencing the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which was very similar to the one Cora hears about; it was enacted in Alabama from 1932 to 1972 and was organised by the US Public Health Service, under the pretence of offering the men free medical treatment. Whitehead transports this from rural Alabama to inner city (anachronistically skyscraper-filled) South Carolina, and into his late-nineteenth-century setting. There are many more racist abuses in the novel, and Cora herself is subjected to some of them. For example, she is imprisoned in an attic, ostensibly to protect her, and Whitehead’s description of Cora’s experiences in this section has led to comparisons being drawn between her and Anne Frank (Preston 2016). Or, for example, a doctor proposes to Cora that she can ‘take control over your own destiny’—ironically drawing attention to the profound lack of control that Cora has over her future—if she participates in a programme for the sterilisation of black women. This is described to her as being for ‘population control’, and refers to various programmes of forced sterilisation for eugenic purposes in the US over much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Whitehead 2016: 113). These temporal and structural anachronisms draw attention to

the indignities and abuses that people have suffered across long periods of history, and to the absurd violence of racialised abuse.

Elodie Rousselot writes of what she calls ‘neo-historical fiction’:

In each instance, the work displays the ‘self-analytic drive’ described by Heilmann and Llewellyn [2010: 22] and consciously re-interprets, rediscovers and revises key aspects of the period it returns to. As with the neo-Victorian therefore, these works are not solely set in the past but conduct an active interrogation of that past [...] (Rousselot 2014: 2)

Rousselot’s recent edited collection *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction* (2014) is currently the only other use of this term ‘neo-historical’ in mainstream critical and theoretical literary work (‘neo-historism’ is a term used in art and architecture, and the adjectival use of this is sometimes ‘neo-historical’; see Urban 2016). Rousselot productively draws on Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s work on neo-Victorianism to build a definition of neo-historical fiction as self-reflexively critically engaged with the past. The use of ‘re’ in this list is crucial—‘re-interprets, rediscovers and revises’—emphasising that the neo-historical aesthetic is engaged in a process of responding to the existing historical narratives about the past, and thereby articulating their limitations. (As I mentioned in my introduction, this ‘re’ will also be significant to my ghosts chapter, in my analysis of the ghostly *returns* of *revenants*.)

One field in which Elodie Rousselot and I also agree is in identifying the contradictoriness of the term ‘neo-historical’. I have highlighted the paradoxical incorporation of postmodern theories of history into otherwise broadly coherent narratives as a reaction against the narrative collapse in historiographic metafiction. Rousselot (2014: 4-5) also writes: ‘Indeed, if historiographic metafiction employs an overtly disruptive mode, the neo-historical carries out its potential for radical possibilities in more implicit ways’. In this argument that interacts closely with my own, she argues:

Neo-historical fiction draws from this paradox in its reimagining of the past: on one hand it strives for a high degree of historical accuracy, while on the other it is conscious of the limitations of that project. The mode of verisimilitude employed by the neo-historical novel therefore confirms its simultaneous attempt *and* refusal to render the past accurately. (Rousselot 2014: 4; original emphasis)

Rousselot’s suggestion that there are ‘limitations’ on a project of historical accuracy is shared in my view that an awareness of the structural impossibility of narrative history, as

a consequence of postmodernism, has changed how historical novels function in the twenty-first century. This is where the neo-historical emerges, for both myself and Rousselot.

Rousselot suggests that ‘verisimilitude’ is the neo-historical response to the paradox of accuracy and simultaneous resistance to it; this, she argues, is the mode through which the paradox is, in some way, resolved, or at least oxymoronically united. Defining ‘verisimilitude’ as the appearance of being true or real, she writes:

In the case of the neo-historical novel however, that verisimilitude can be endowed with subversive capabilities. Indeed, despite appearing ‘genuine’, verisimilitude only ever aims at conveying a surface image of the real. In fact, by its very nature, verisimilitude is emphatically not ‘veracious’. (Rousselot 2014: 4)

This, however, is where our arguments diverge. ‘Verisimilitude’ might be seen as, in some ways, synonymous with the way I have defined ‘authenticity’, in offering a structure for understanding the tension between impossible history and coherent narrative. However, neo-historical anachronisms are at odds with Rousselot’s ‘surface image of the real’. Rousselot is arguing that there is an attempt, in ‘neo-historical fiction’, ‘to render the past accurately’, but that use of the word ‘accurately’ is a troubling one in the context of texts such as *The Underground Railroad*. There is no room in this verisimilitudinous narrative form for the overtly disruptive and very clearly anachronistic steam trains running across the United States in a complex network of tunnels and tracks, for example.

Although it is a little unclear what Rousselot means by her belief that these novels ‘appear genuine’, I take it to be implying, as per the previous quotation, that they *appear to be* ‘accurate’ narratives about the past. However, neo-historical anachronisms ensure that these novels don’t ‘appear genuine’ or ‘convey a surface image of the real’. What we get, instead, is a narrative in which inaccuracies are not hidden under the surface, but rather exposed, problematising the narrative without interrupting its progression or its representation of some imagined version of the past. At no point do *The Underground Railroad*’s fundamental anachronisms disrupt the narrative’s progression. The bizarreness of the railroad becomes a plausible context and characters accept it, even with their amazement and respect for it as an achievement. But there is no way around the *conspicuousness* of these inaccuracies—we *know* that this network is impossible, and we cannot avoid that knowledge in the text. Rousselot (2014: 5) argues that ‘in seeking to reproduce the past so faithfully—at least on the surface—the neo-historical critical engagement with that past may appear to be absent, while it is in fact seamlessly embedded

into the fabric of the text'. That use of the word 'seamless' is problematic. Where Rousselot's verisimilitude insists that these narratives are textually straightforward, with complex undercurrents, I see the 'paradox' as being both deeper and also more visible on the surface. Whilst no longer experiencing the profound metafictional disruptions of postmodern novels, the neo-historical aesthetic allows disruptions that, paradoxically, do not disrupt the coherence or development of a fictional historical narrative. So, for example, 'weapons of mass destruction' does not prevent the narrative from proceeding clearly, but it does sharply draw our attention to the circumstances of the novel's creation and the problematics of historical representation even within historical representation itself. Similarly, persistently drawing attention to the flawed *process* of narrativisation—as Mantel does in *Wolf Hall*—clearly demonstrates neo-historical critical engagement; it is not, by any means, 'seamlessly embedded'. However, the narratives proceed even with these explicit present-day influences, and are not disrupted by them. This is thus definitive of a certain aspect of the self-contradictory post-postmodern condition, which will be further elucidated in subsequent chapters.

### **Conclusion: It's the living that turn and chase the dead**

A young Thomas Cromwell asks his father's assistant, who is making coffin nails: 'What for do we nail down the dead?' The assistant replies: 'It's so the horrible old buggers don't spring out and chase us'. But the adult Cromwell thinks:

He knows different now. It's the living that turn and chase the dead. The long bones and skulls are tumbled from their shrouds, and words like stones thrust into their rattling mouths: we edit their writings, we rewrite their lives. (Mantel 2010: 649)

Mantel's narrative here acknowledges her fraught and anachronistic presence as a novelist and narrator, putting 'words like stones' into the mouths of her historical characters. It is, of course, the most profound of neo-historical paradoxical ironies that it is these *specific* words, this phrase—'words like stones'—that are now thrust into Cromwell's own mouth—or his thoughts, at least. The anachronistic cycle of this is manifold, with the rewriting of his life literally taking place through *these* words.

Mantel has said of this process:

The pursuit of the past makes you aware, whether you are novelist or historian, of the dangers of your own fallibility and inbuilt bias. The writer of history is a walking anachronism, a displaced person, using today's techniques to try to know things about yesterday that yesterday didn't know itself. He must try to work authentically,

hearing the words of the past, but communicating in a language the present understands. (Mantel 2017a)

This last sentence is reminiscent of my earlier discussion about the inevitable anachronisms of writing historical fiction, about the need to write in a present-day, anachronistic language to make a text accessible to contemporary readers. Mantel also here highlights the anachronism of the *process* of writing, and thus again implicitly states her own post-postmodern position, in which she has postmodern awareness of the impossibility of knowing ‘yesterday’/the past, but seeks to write it in narrative anyway. Her use of the word ‘authentic’ in this context is telling—insisting that the author must ‘try to work authentically’ is an attempt to accrue legitimacy, further reinforcing the sense that ‘authenticity’ functions differently in the neo-historical aesthetic to how the word might have previously been used. Mantel acknowledges the impossibility of accuracy, but still insists upon authenticity, as I have argued the neo-historical aesthetic requires. Authenticity is one point at which the post-postmodernism of the neo-historical aesthetic can be observed.

That post-postmodernism is a fraught and self-contradictory cultural context has been evident throughout this chapter. These contradictions are evident in Mantel’s words, in her insistence on authentic narrative in the face of fallibility and inbuilt bias—but still with a contradictory insistence that it is possible to ‘hear the words of the past’. Mantel here comes to indicate the tension that is the neo-historical aspect of trying to narrate history from a post-postmodern perspective.

In *Wolf Hall* (2010: 118), Cromwell thinks (or possibly the narrator asserts—another case in which it is hard to be sure of which): ‘There cannot be new things in England. There can be old things freshly presented, or new things that pretend to be old’. In a congruent statement, Jameson (2005: 170) writes of postmodernism that ‘we are also generally inclined to think today that there is nothing in our possible representations which was not somehow already in our historical experience’. Again, post-postmodernism offers a new mediation of this, with #liveauthentic’s enthusiasm for the ‘old’, for ‘things with a story’, as a counterpoint to an apparent saturation with the ‘new’ of contemporary, disposable consumer culture. This builds on Jameson’s own view of a postmodern desire for history.

Similar again to Cromwell’s ‘old things freshly presented, or new things that pretend to be old’, Jeffrey T. Nealon (2012: 166) writes:

If postmodernism played to an end game the thematics of innovation born in modernism [...], then [in post-postmodernism] the problems of writing shift to negotiating through the vast archive of the powers of the false, the creative powers in combining pre-existing language, rather than hoping through force of creative will to add something novel to that archive.

The similarity in these two perspectives further reinforces that Mantel's Cromwell is an anachronistic proto-post-postmodernist, tensely aware of an anachronistic set of twenty-first-century conditions in the mediation of history. Cromwell is resigned to the belief that 'there can be no new things in England', which is broadly congruent with Nealon's structuring post-postmodernism around an awareness that we can only ever 'combine pre-existing language', and that it is no longer possible to 'add something novel'. Nealon is thus suggesting that, in post-postmodernism, one of the great crises is the impossibility of creating anything new, as it also was in postmodernism. This might, in part, account for the popularity of historical fiction in the twenty-first century, and we might here read post-postmodernism as acting on a postmodern, libidinal historicist desire, identified by Jameson, to resolve the absence of history. Located within this is a reason for the development of the neo-historical aesthetic.

Thus we see the neo-historical aesthetic participating in the same kind of new/old discourse, post-postmodernly creating Cromwell's 'new things that pretend to be old', self-reflexively and contradictorily marking the fraught condition of being a text about the past created in the present. Anachronisms *are* 'new things that pretend to be old', but their pretence is a transparent one, knowingly alerting the reader to the inevitability of present-day influence on narratives of the past. But the neo-historical aesthetic offers up that narrative *anyway*. Lee Konstantinou (2013: 421) writes that 'Nealon's ultimate, welcome point is that we need "a more robust sense of the literary"'. Texts might not only mean something but also do something', or, in Nealon's (2012: 148; original emphasis) words: 'From a focus on *understanding* something to a concern with *manipulating* it—from (postmodern) *meaning* to (post-postmodern) *usage*'. This is another important point at which my interpretation of the neo-historical diverts from Elodie Rousselot's. Rousselot is focused on what kinds of histories these texts produce, in what 'neo-historical fictions' can tell us about the past. I am interested in what they suggest about the process of *doing* history; they offer a new way to do history after postmodernism, but in a way that is inevitably limited by post-postmodernism's contradictory, insistent commitment to narrative. This is the neo-historical aesthetic's potential, and its limitation. It identifies the



contradictions of the post-postmodern condition, and attempts to *do* fictionalised history through them.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This was true of Mantel's (2010: end matter 7) comments, discussed in the introduction to this thesis. See also, for example, Merritt (2014).

<sup>2</sup> There are exceptions to this rule, such as Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch* (2006), discussed at length in the next chapter, which has three sections, the first set in 1947, the second in 1944, and the third in 1941. This might suggest a disrupted narrative structure, not sharing in a neo-historical commitment to narrative, but—as I will discuss—the development of events remains coherent and logical, with suspense being drawn from wanting to know what led to the conclusion in 1947.

## Chapter two

### **‘I had no idea that landings could be so thrilling’: Sarah Waters and the middlebrow neo-historical aesthetic in *The Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests***

If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat, or half-crushed worm dares to call me ‘middlebrow’, I will take my pen and stab him dead.

Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth* (1942: 119)

Sarah Waters’s sixth novel, *The Paying Guests* (2014), centres on the experiences of Frances Wray, a woman in her late twenties from a once-wealthy family. Caring for the family home and her aging mother in the aftermath of the First World War and after the deaths of her brothers, Frances takes in lodgers—or ‘paying guests’, as social decorum amongst her mothers’ peers requires her to call them (Waters 2014: 35). ‘And here they were, at the heart of her house! Her mind ran back, unwillingly, to Stevie’s warning about the “clerk class”’ (Waters 2014: 59). Here, Frances is thinking back to a conversation with Stevie, an acquaintance, which takes place while Frances and her lodgers are still in the early stages of their relationship, while she continues to be baffled and disturbed by their position in her life. ‘Position’ here, and as this quotation demonstrates, covers a number of aspects of the relationship between landlady and lodgers, including their physical presence, articulated as a bodily intrusion into a domestic space that she feels tensely possessive of—the ‘heart of her house’. However, there is also their troubling class position relative to her own, intimately connected in this quotation to this physical and domestic encroachment on Frances’s space; they are ‘clerk class’, part of the emerging lower middle class in the period, and Frances’s ‘unwilling’ distaste for this is evident from her awareness of the ‘warning’ she has received about them.

Stevie, an upper middle-class woman living in Bloomsbury and working as an artist, had warned that the ‘clerk class’ ‘look tame. They sound tame. But under those doilies and antimacassars they’re still rough as hell. No, give me good honest slum people over people like that, any day’ (Waters 2014: 46). The implications of Stevie’s attitude are multiple, not least her apparent preference for members of the clerk class to be ‘tame’—managed and controlled—rather than apparently misleading in their class expressions and position; being *secretly* ‘rough as hell’ is apparently much more distasteful than being ‘honestly’ working class. (Her dismissive attitude to the ‘doilies and antimacassars’ asserts her own sense of superiority in domestic taste, as well.) Frances does not entirely share

these disdainful views about class, and her largely unrelated dislike of Stevie in general makes this perspective distasteful to her, and as Frances comes to know her lodgers, Leonard and Lilian Barber, her understanding of class—among other things—changes dramatically. In many of her novels, including *The Paying Guests*, Waters's characters' everyday lives are profoundly influenced by anxieties about class, and this becomes a central part of how her novels imagine their historical settings.

This preoccupation with historical ideas about class—and especially with complexities of status within the middle class—is one way in which Sarah Waters's novels might be defined as 'middlebrow'. This chapter will explore the implications and applications of that term, via the critical works of Nicola Humble, Beth Driscoll, and others, working through the different aspects of the middlebrow and their relevance to two of Waters's later novels, *The Night Watch* (2006) and *The Paying Guests*. Selecting these novels emphasises that the focus of the neo-historical aesthetic is not a specific fascination with the nineteenth century (her first three novels are all 'neo-Victorian', a field of literature that I will discuss in more detail in my next chapter), but a cross-period engagement with the process of doing history. The fact that these two novels are set in the 1940s and 1922 respectively means they have certain period-specific links with the development of the feminine middlebrow in the first half of the twentieth century, but this chapter will work to demonstrate that the novels' middlebrowness is also wider and more twenty-first-century than this historical link. I will argue that the form and aesthetics of the middlebrow, as well as its readership, make it the necessary mode of the neo-historical aesthetic. This is for a number of reasons, but most prominently because middlebrow novels are generally accessible, i.e. they are easy-to-read narratives, but they are simultaneously intellectually challenging, to a degree. This is fundamental to a project of redefining and rewriting history through fiction, as these neo-histories require intellectual engagement from readers in order to be interpreted (more on this in the next chapter, with regard to the 'knowing' collusion required between author and reader). This chapter will explore the different ways in which this middlebrow accessibility is manifested in Waters's novels and how it is inextricably connected to her neo-historical project.

Even beyond this, however, having in the previous chapter established the post-postmodern logics of the neo-historical aesthetic, I wish to demonstrate here that the middlebrow is the locus of the contradictory crises I have defined. Waters's middlebrow novels work within a longstanding tradition of middlebrow historical fictions—as I will demonstrate below—but after postmodern destabilisations of history in narrative, this has

become a tense narrative space. Middlebrow historical fictions have long demonstrated a capacity to bend the rules of traditional history, particularly in women writers' use of this fictional space to write women into otherwise male-dominated histories (again see Diana Wallace on this), but in this new post-postmodern incarnation, they are subtly acknowledging the unreliable status of their narratives, even as they simultaneously valorise narrative itself. Waters's novels therefore demonstrate that this middlebrow is where the ongoing commitment to narrative, simultaneous to an acknowledgement of its flaws, *must* take place, because this is the literary field that is both influenced by *and* resistant to postmodernism.

'Middlebrow' is a historical term, as explored by Nicola Humble and several others (see Humble 2001; Radway 1997; Rubin 1992), referring to a certain set of literary practices in the twentieth century, starting with a form of para-modernism in the period just after the First World War. As I have suggested, the concurrence between this and the setting of Waters's *The Paying Guests* is by no means coincidental, which will become apparent later in this chapter. However, the middlebrow is also relevant to the contemporary literary cultural field, as Beth Driscoll explores in her study *The New Literary Middlebrow* (2014). My analysis will investigate Waters's novels' relevance to both the historical use of the term and its contemporary meaning. These novels' preoccupation with class will form a substantial part of this discussion, but so will several other key aspects of middlebrowness, namely: accessible and interpretable narratives; the prioritising of emotional connection, both internal to the text and for readers; and the recurrent significance of the domestic in middlebrow narratives. The latter two of these are related to the works of Humble and Driscoll. This importance of the domestic in *The Paying Guests* is already evident from my brief discussion of the novel above, as is the contested nature of domestic space in relation to class. I will also use Waters's novels to apply and expand Driscoll's thesis on the 'new literary middlebrow', in which she argues that the middlebrow has developed into a specifically twenty-first-century presence, through a set of middlebrow conditions and reading practices, over the past couple of decades. With this in mind, I will explore what I call Waters's 'literariness'—her conspicuous use of literary tropes—and I will propose that this is central to the middlebrow and its neo-historical accessibility. Within this, I will explore why and how the middlebrow is so integral to the neo-historical aesthetic, considering Waters's literariness as an element of her neo-historical project. Neo-historical narratives prioritise their fictionality, acknowledging postmodernism by drawing attention to the imagined

and invented aspects of the texts' historical positioning—thereby implying the impossibility of accessing the 'true' past through narrative. This is what Waters's literariness does. By making her literary tropes conspicuously present, she reminds us that these are fictional histories occurring within contested narratives. A persistent awareness of this is what makes them *neo*-histories.

This is important in the context of Waters's novels, which seek to write lesbian histories that exceed the capacity of known, heteropatriarchal and canonical, history. Middlebrow fiction offers a space for such a project, but in a post-postmodern, neo-historical context, this fictional space is self-referentially made explicit, even within the use of its narrative potential to invent histories. I will argue in this chapter that Waters uses several means to access this capacity, including manipulating sometimes non-chronological narrative methodologies—as I suggest through an investigation of the middlebrow associations with the word 'heritage'. She acknowledges the marginalisation of lesbian narratives from the heteropatriarchal canon by emphasising that troubled, fictional, and literary narratives are one of the only contexts in which such histories can be fully explored. This has problems, as I will go on to discuss, for the inevitably and emphatically middlebrow histories she produces, which in some ways circumscribe non-heteropatriarchal neo-histories *within* that middlebrow.

This chapter will therefore begin with an account of what the middlebrow actually is, considering negative historical interpretations of it, and how they are connected to misogynist exclusionary approaches to women's writing. This first section will propose a mobilisation of a certain definition of the middlebrow that seeks to move beyond this negativity, whilst continuing to acknowledge some of the more problematic and sometimes exclusionary elements of middlebrow conservatism. Following this will be a section on this 'literariness' in *The Night Watch*, and I will suggest that the explicitness of Waters's literary tropes demonstrates that she clearly positions the novel as *fiction* as well as *history*, drawing attention to the carefully crafted nature of the text. This is essential to understanding the novel as a participant in the neo-historical aesthetic: it is therefore a new kind of post-postmodern history that is constructed *through* fiction and narrative and that is explicitly fictional, but thereby creates a different, imagined version of the past.

The next section will move from this to think about *The Paying Guests* and how, in this novel, the *middle* class becomes the *middleground* for Waters's *middlebrow* historical imaginings. In particular, I will consider the non-linear links made between the middle class in the present and in the 1920s through domestic and care work in the novel, and

thus the kinds of emotional connections that middlebrow fiction—and Waters’s novels—create between readers, and between readers and text. Lauren Berlant’s (2008: viii) concept of the ‘intimate public’ will inform this discussion, and enable an interpretation of Waters’s neo-histories as providing a ‘commonly lived history’ between readers and characters through emotional, middlebrow fiction. In this range of different ways then—through accessibility and limited intellectual engagement, through the conspicuous use of literary tropes, and through middlebrow emotional connectivity—this chapter will use Waters’s novels to demonstrate that the neo-historical aesthetic’s mediation of postmodern and pre-postmodern relationships to history and narrative is, by necessity, manifested in the middlebrow. The neo-historical relies on a middlebrow mode of engagement, because this is where the post-postmodern crises at its heart are most conspicuously played out. In imagining lesbian histories in this post-postmodern, middlebrow context, Waters uses the neo-historical aesthetic to acknowledge the narrative impossibility of the histories she is writing, even as she asserts their validity in narrative.

### **Middlebrow methodology and positioning the critical field**

A potential problem with defining Waters as middlebrow is the contested nature of that word. This is particularly because of the implied criticism that ‘middlebrow’ is deemed to carry. As Humble (2001: 1) puts it, “‘Middlebrow’ has always been a dirty word”. Virginia Woolf (1942: 119) succinctly and vehemently (and amusingly) expresses this in the epigraph to this chapter: ‘If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat, or half-crushed worm dares to call me “middlebrow”, I will take my pen and stab him dead’. While more recent recipients of the epithet ‘middlebrow’ might have stopped short of ‘stabbing dead’ those that applied the term to their works, they have certainly not been happy about it. Beth Driscoll (2015) described Susan Johnson, Antonia Hayes, and Stephanie Bishop as ‘middlebrow’ in the *Sydney Review of Books* in October 2015, and the three authors wrote an outraged, ‘startled and offended’ response in a subsequent edition (Johnson et al 2015). Given that Driscoll (2014: 33) elsewhere identifies the emotional expressiveness of authors’ public personalities as being a feature of the middlebrow, this emotive, emotional, and public response from Johnson, Hayes, and Bishop is conspicuous. Many (predominantly male) newspaper reviewers continue to use ‘middlebrow’ in a derogatory way, perhaps ironically, given their status as part of what Driscoll would call ‘middlebrow institutions’ (Indyk 2015; Jones 2015; McCrum 2013). In doing so, they (mostly implicitly) follow Dwight Macdonald’s (2011) not especially persuasive, but impressively persistent

and influential, dismissal of the synonymous ‘Midcult’ in the 1960s. Essentially, middlebrow texts are often seen as unserious literature, lacking in substance or intellectualism, easy to read rather than formally challenging (see Indyk 2015 for an especially vehement version of this).

Driscoll attempted to make clear in her *SRB* article that defined Johnson, Hayes, and Bishop as middlebrow that there is an application of the term that does not share this longstanding negativity. Some of the negatively interpreted features of middlebrowness might still be present, of course, and, as I will discuss below, the middlebrow can still have problematically conservative and limiting associations. However, to assume that the middlebrow is an unavoidably derisive term is to obfuscate its literary and cultural potential. In defining it in *The New Literary Middlebrow*, Driscoll (2014: 17) lists eight key elements: ‘The literary middlebrow is middle-class, reverential towards high culture and commercial; it is feminized, emotional, recreational, mediated and earnest’. As Driscoll’s work shows, each of these key elements warrants an analysis—indeed, an analysis in relation to Waters—in its own right, but this chapter will focus on three of these key elements: the middle class, the feminine (and Humble’s domestic as related to this gendering), and the emotional middlebrow. Driscoll (2014: 6) emphasises that the eight points by which she defines the middlebrow are not ‘strictly necessary requirements’ for something to *be* middlebrow, but it is troubling that the superlative language she uses to describe them—‘never’, ‘continually’—suggests the opposite. As such, my use of the term will diverge slightly from Driscoll’s own, not least because several of those eight features for the middlebrow do not fit with Waters, such as its reverential and aspirational aspects, as Driscoll defines them. In addition to this, I will add a further definition of my own, one which coheres neatly with Driscoll’s eight features, but that is not explicitly stated in any of them: the middlebrow is accessible. In the case of literature, this means that it is not necessarily always simple, and may require some level of intellectual engagement—as an analysis of Waters’s novels demonstrates—but it remains easily readable. This is related to its middle-class aspects, associated with the assumed (higher) educational experience (see McGurl 2009 and Driscoll 2014: 18, 163) and cultural capital of its readers. However, this definition of accessibility also differentiates the middlebrow from the challenging and inaccessible highbrow content of ‘literary fiction’, which I will define in more detail below.

In my analysis, the middlebrow is not necessarily a distinct category of literature. As Humble (2001: 28) puts it, ‘both the middlebrow and the highbrow need finally to be understood not as formal or generic categories, but as cultural constructs’. Following this,

I will use the term as Melissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch (2011) do, in their special issue of *Modernist Cultures*, wherein the middlebrow is an aesthetic and a set of practices that circulate around the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts. This is similar to the way in which I have defined the neo-historical aesthetic, in that it is identifiable by a set of tropes within texts, which can be present to varying degrees. However, where the neo-historical aesthetic appears as a set of images and actions within texts, the middlebrow is also part of a set of reading, dissemination, promotional, and consumption practices, such as public book groups and newspaper reviews—as I discuss below. Rather than being exclusively textually focused, the middlebrow (and even the specifically literary middlebrow) is much broader than the neo-historical aesthetic, both conceptually and in the ways it can be present and articulated. My analysis will rely on the understanding that not all eight of Driscoll's middlebrow identifiers need to be present for a text to be 'middlebrow', for example, and, as I said, I will only be specifically focusing on a small number of them. Rather, the different ways in which the middlebrow can be identified, whether through tropes, reading practices, images, themes, or content, will all be considered 'middlebrow'.

With these middlebrow features in mind, then—middle-class, feminised, emotional, and accessible—this chapter mobilises a definition of the middlebrow not as the staid and sentimental mass-appeal product of intellectually lazy middle-class readership markets—its negative mobilisation. Instead, I will use it as a politicised term, one that is at the core of multiple debates on the marginalisation and discrediting of women's writing and reading experiences, and, in the case of Waters's novels, women's (fictional) histories. This is another reason that the neo-historical aesthetic commonly appears in middlebrow texts, of course, because the middlebrow has long been the predominant mode of historical fiction, and women's historical fiction in particular. Such fiction has been persistently excluded both from mainstream historical narratives and even from the historiography of historical fiction itself. As I mentioned in my introduction to this thesis, Diana Wallace (2013: 7) highlights the historical and ongoing marginalisation of women's writing from critical studies of the field, with, for example, critics from Georg Lukács in the mid-twentieth century to Jerome de Groot in 2016, positing Walter Scott as the progenitor of the historical novel, despite important women's historical fictional writing in the years preceding the publication of *Waverley* in 1814. Wallace emphasises Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, which was published in 1783.



Highlighting this marginalisation of women's historical fiction from critical study is not to assume that all women's historical fiction has been middlebrow, but rather to highlight that its marginalisation from the category of 'serious literature' is conspicuous. With that said—and with an emphasis on not too broad a generalisation—much women's historical fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries *has* participated in the middlebrow, from Georgette Heyer in the 1920s, to Mary Renault in the 1950s, to Philippa Gregory and Sarah Perry in the present day. Each of these authors is middlebrow in a number of Driscoll's listed ways and this has been a source of marginalisation and a particular set of assumptions about the staid limitations of these texts. Perry's *The Essex Serpent* (2016), for example, has a conspicuously middle-class focus, its commercial advertising and production has been hugely widespread, it has emotional content—the list could go on. It was, in 2016, the toast of a range of middlebrow institutions including the Richard and Judy Book Club (and indeed, in theory, many reading groups), various glowing newspaper reviews, and several awards nominations and wins, including at the British Book Awards. A *Spectator* review (Cummins 2016), was headlined 'Don't be too cool for *The Essex Serpent*', implying that the novel may be ignored because of a set of very obviously middlebrow associations. Cummins argues that readers may think they are 'too cool' for the novel because 'it sets out unashamedly to lift the spirits' and 'partly because historical novels are sometimes derided as escapist, as if they're only a fallback for authors who can't keep up with, say, immigration or the internet'. Historical fiction, and especially women's historical fiction, has telling associations with the middlebrow. This locates one reason why the neo-historical aesthetic so frequently appears in that middlebrow.

However, it is also important to note that the links between the neo-historical aesthetic and the middlebrow extend beyond this fairly straightforward historical logic. Historiographic metafiction destabilised some of these associations between historical fiction and the middlebrow in the latter part of the twentieth century. In postmodernism, historiographic metafiction pushed historical fiction into a more challengingly highbrow location—and I will discuss this in more detail in relation to Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) below. As such, the middlebrowness of post-postmodern texts is also very much part of a reactionary return to the middlebrowness of what I have called the 'pre-postmodern' moment; it is a return to accessible narrative. This is another reason for reading the post-postmodernity of the neo-historical aesthetic as being so inextricably linked with the middlebrow. Through articulations of class such as the one above, i.e. *because* her novels are middlebrow, Waters is able to write accessible neo-histories—

fictionalised versions of the past—that formulate democratically accessible, emotional communities between readers, and between present and past. That these histories occasionally continue to participate in more conservative discourses speaks to the malleability of the middlebrow, in that its liminal position—like that of post-postmodernism—allows it to function within a range of contradictory discourses simultaneously.

From a methodological perspective, with regard to these discussions around accessibility, and how it relates to consumption and reading practices, a reader survey is not my intent; I will not present empirical data on how Waters's texts are consumed in a middlebrow way. However, interpreting the consumption of texts remains a central aspect of my definition of the middlebrow. I will focus on how Waters's readership is manifested *in* her texts, in their form, style, content, and preoccupations. The literary expectations of a contemporary middle-class readership are visible in Waters's prose style, and in the subject matter of her novels. This will be supported by Humble's and Driscoll's work on the middlebrow readership and its expectations. I will not be able to focus on the dissemination of these texts; there is much to be said about the middlebrowness of their covers, which form a significant part of Waters's middlebrow market presentation by her publisher, but my definition of the neo-historical aesthetic relies much more heavily on their written content.

For an interpretation of Waters as middlebrow, her position within the contemporary literary and literary critical field is also relevant, and in considering my methodology and terms, I will briefly survey that field. Lesbianism is broadly seen as Waters's primary focus and the most influential aspect of her novels, with many critical interpretations (problematically) seeing her as 'uncovering' lesbian histories in her novels. My primary challenge to this perspective is that these novels are so explicitly fictional—in their literariness as I will go on to discuss—that it is misguided to see them as 'uncovering' anything. Jeannette King (2005: 3-4), for example, writes that Waters is engaged in her novels in a 'wider project, pioneered by second wave feminism, of rewriting history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded or marginalized'. This word 'recovering' is particularly troubling, implying that this is an archaeological project to restore 'excluded or marginalized' women's histories to a position equivalent with men's grand narrative histories—and thus suggesting that it is a project similarly invested in those same historically exclusionary structures as the grand narratives. Diana Wallace's (2005: 3) arguments are again relevant here, as she establishes

historical fiction as a longstanding space for women *inventing* their otherwise marginalised histories: “‘History’ [i.e. canonical “factual” historical accounts] has traditionally excluded women, but paradoxically the “historical novel” has offered women readers the imaginative space to create different, more inclusive versions of “history”, which are accessible or appealing to them in various ways’. This emphasis on the *imaginative* space of historical fiction—for women readers as much as authors—is more convincing than the ‘recovering’ project that King identifies, as it suggests that women’s histories seek an entirely different narrative space from grand narrative ‘History’. This works as a reminder that this is not just a post-postmodern drive.

While it is true that Waters’s focus is on the absent histories of women in many cases (*The Little Stranger* [2009] does not fit this pattern, and indeed, that novel does not fit with many of Waters’s patterns), the literariness that I will go on to discuss in more detail below suggests that this is a much more complex impulse than just ‘recovering’. Paulina Palmer (1999: 20) writes of this that for ‘women who identify as lesbian or bisexual’, the trauma of an absence of history can be at least partially resolved by the ‘reconstruction of the past, imaginative as well as scholarly’. While we would be right to question the generality of Palmer’s remark, and, indeed, the use of the word ‘reconstruction’, implying as it does a factual reconstruction of a past moment, her reference to the ‘imaginative’ is informative. While Waters’s works do not ‘reconstruct’ the past, being too playfully fictionalised and inflected by the present to do so, they do gesture towards a certain, imagined version of it.

Recent scholarship on Waters has engaged with this complexity in her novels, such as Kaye Mitchell’s (2013b: 86; original emphasis) chapter on *The Night Watch*, in which she argues, via Annamarie Jagose and Elizabeth Freeman (the latter’s work on queer time will come up in the conclusion of the next chapter) that the novel literally resists ‘the *sequences*—of heteronormative society’, and thereby the constraints of normative history. This is a useful analysis of Waters; here, time in *The Night Watch* is structured to create complex patterns of resistance to the sort of normative historical narrative structure that King, in suggesting that these narratives pursue parity with male histories, implies that Waters is seeking for her marginalised women. Mitchell’s analysis is exclusively about *The Night Watch*, however, which is notably different from Waters’s other, linearly structured narratives, and thus cannot—in this particular sense—be read as representative of her overarching project. Mitchell does not make the claim that it can be read as such, but these limiting parameters of her discussion are essential for a broader definition of Waters

and her participation in the middlebrow, with both its political potential and its conservative limitations. Also thinking about time, contemplating the overarching structures of time in historical fiction, and especially queer historical fiction, Mandy Koolen (2010: 373) has done important analyses of different types of cross-period identification that might be useful for lesbian and gay historical studies. She explores applications of the terms ‘transhistorical’, ‘ahistorical’, and ‘trans(a)historical’, via Norman W. Jones, to historical fiction, and to *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) in particular. She suggests that ‘queer historical novels do the important work of filling in gaps in the historical record by speculating about past experiences of same-sex desire that have been erased or neglected in many historical studies’. This word ‘speculating’ is evidently a step forward from ‘recovering’, but still implies that this is a pursuit of some kind of alternative ‘truth’, that these are suggestions for what might-have-been, rather than playful and politicised imaginings of entirely fictionalised characters within broadly familiar historical settings.

Queerness and lesbianism have, understandably, been the primary focus of Waters’s criticism.<sup>1</sup> Waters’s novels represent a shift in the position of queer fiction in contemporary society—as I will discuss later. However, such a heavy critical focus on this one radical element of Waters’s work means there has been less acknowledgement of the other cultural identities that are also part of these novels, and that are also influential for her lesbian characters. In defining Waters as middlebrow, exploring how this enables the explicit fictionality of a neo-historical project and locates the crisis in post-postmodern histories, my discussions will be both explicitly and implicitly underpinned by an awareness of the white and middle-class nature of Waters’s characters and her project. The white-middle-class cultural positioning of her novels has been underestimated by critical discussions so far, and will form a part of my analyses of the middlebrow. The forthcoming analysis of Waters, then, contributes to this critical field in this way, by offering a broader understanding of the limitations of Waters’s middlebrow project, as well as its wide potential.

### **The conspicuous ‘literariness’ of *The Night Watch***

With this understanding of some of the implicitly problematic elements of the middlebrow and their underpinning relationship to Waters’s novels in mind, I wish to move on from this mention of *The Night Watch* in criticism to a direct analysis of the novel itself. I will now further develop the idea that Waters’s conspicuous use of literary tropes is one of the ways in which we can identify the presence of the neo-historical aesthetic in

her works, and, simultaneously, one of their fundamentally middlebrow features. I will also further work to define the middlebrow itself, in relation to the highbrow, both in general, and in the specific context of Waters's novel and its relationship to historiographic metafiction. This further cements the argument that the neo-historical aesthetic relies on the middlebrow and demonstrates how these middlebrow texts are the places in which the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of postmodern deconstructions of narrative are situated.

In their approaches to discussing *The Night Watch*, critical analyses have been wide-ranging in the themes and ideas they have identified (even with lesbianism and queerness as the underlying identity-based focuses). These include: Rachel Wood's (2013) analysis of walking in the novel, and its relationship to sight and being seen; Elsa Cavalié's (2014) discussions of the novel's articulations of Britishness and exoticism; and Natasha Alden's (2013) discussion of the literary histories visible in the novel—and in this last analysis, all of the literary texts that are deemed relevant are notably middlebrow, although this is not acknowledged in the article. In many ways, *The Night Watch* is a novel primed for critical engagement, as I will go on to discuss, with its 'literary' features visible and present, from the reverse chronological structure, to the political themes of historical marginalisation, to the apparitional lesbian presence of Kay, about whom, as with many of Waters's characters, the ghostly metaphors very visibly swirl, like the spirit-echoes of Terry Castle's (1993) identification of this literary trope.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it seems apparent, in this case, that we should see the apparitional lesbian in *particular* in Waters's presentation of Kay; the repetitions of ghostly metaphors are so frequent as to make this critical trope very present. To take another trope, however, which has received less critical attention, light, dark, and half-light are conspicuously recurrent images in *The Night Watch*. This functions as a metaphor for the middleness of the middlebrow, and is one of these conspicuous literary tropes that highlight the fictionality of this novel.

Set in sections in reverse chronological order, from 1947, to 1944, to 1941, the novel examines four characters' responses to and experiences of the trauma of the London Blitz specifically, and the Second World War more generally. One of these characters, Kay, has suffered a profound loss during the war—although only indirectly as a consequence of it—and so, in the first section of the novel, 1947, she is living a grief-stricken half-life:

And then it seemed to her that she really might be a ghost, that she might be becoming part of the faded fabric of the house, dissolving into the gloom which gathered, like dust, in its crazy angles. (Waters 2006: 4)

As I have said, the ghostly elements of this are immediately evident, but the ‘gloom which gathered, like dust’, is also a key aspect of the characterisation of Kay, and her grief. She has the sense of herself as almost invisible, ‘dissolving into the gloom’. During the war, as we learn in the 1944 section that follows this 1947 one, Kay worked as an ambulance driver, and she experienced profoundly traumatic events, responding to them with generosity and courage. Now, in the aftermath of the war, Kay finds herself asking incredulously, ‘Did we really do those things we did?’ (Waters 2006: 108) The ‘did we’ / ‘we did’ contradiction in this question speaks to a deep personal crisis. Kaye Mitchell (2013b: 85) describes this (using the same quotation) as a ‘subjective, idiosyncratic conception of time but one that also, paradoxically, threatens [Kay’s] stability and substance as a subject’. This insubstantial presence, as Kay dissolves into the gloom, is a very explicit metaphor for that personal crisis.

Viv, another key character in the novel, passes a cinema later that day:

[...] and the lights seemed to shine more luridly, more luminously, for shining in the twilight rather than the dark. She saw odd little disconnected details: the glint of an earring, the gleam of a man’s hair, the sparkle of crystal in the paving stones. (Waters 2006: 75)

The brightness of the light here is simultaneously ‘lurid’—negative and glaring—and ‘luminous’—positive, attractive, in the wider twilight. Moments later, immediately after this description of the lights, Viv sees Kay for the first time in many years, which revives deep emotional traumas from the war for her. The interplay of light and dark here, and the half-light of twilight, are thus, once again, linked to Kay herself. The ‘disconnected details’ that refract and reflect that light come to include Kay herself, disconnected as she is from the world around her. The persistent link between Kay and the half-light is Waters’s manipulation of what Annamarie Jagose (2002: 1) calls ‘the commonplace, rehearsed in homophobic and antihomophobic discourses alike, that the cultural lot of lesbianism is invisibility’. Rather than making Kay entirely invisible, however, Waters plays on the ‘commonplace’ of the absence of the lesbian from historical record—to which Jagose is here referring and which we also see in *Castle*—in this neo-historical modification of the metaphor. Kay is no longer invisible, in the neo-history that *The Night Watch* imagines. Rather, she is half-invisible, hidden by gloom, and lost in her own grief. The connection between Kay and half-light in this section is a conspicuous one, as these quotations, and this analysis, go only part of the way towards demonstrating: ‘The room was dim’; ‘Her face was lit up rather greenishly, because ivy smothered the window’; ‘The

whiteness of the sky made her blink'; 'she found a doorstep in a shadow of a broken wall, and sat down' (Waters 2006: 4, 5, 6, 110). This recurrence of a literary trope informs a simple but clear interpretation of the impact of Kay's trauma, her sense of herself as half-living, perpetually existing within the emotional 'gloom'. It also reinforces Kay's status as an imagined, neo-historical lesbian, whose fictionalised representation is influenced by an awareness of the obscurity of lesbians in canonical history.

The simplicity and accessibility of these metaphors is part of Waters's novels and their middlebrow status. There are many problems with defining the 'middlebrow', but one that recurs is the fact that it is 'provisional and relational, always defined by reference to its neighbours, the popular lowbrow and the elite highbrow' (Driscoll 2014: 7). Fredric Jameson (1985: 112) wrote that postmodernism led to 'the effacement [...] of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture'. That Jameson seems to disregard the possibility of a middlebrow is noticeable, but it is evident from his definition of the postmodern collapse of boundaries that the way in which Driscoll defines this in-betweenness is, in part, a product of postmodernism itself. From Driscoll's definition, we already see how the cultural status of the middlebrow is to be 'in between', which will recur throughout my discussion, but which is certainly present in the half-lit, half-dark of Kay's half-life. She is, indeed, in between; she is in this liminally lit space, and she thus emphasises middleness.

However, while Driscoll is right that this in-betweenness can be a problem for defining the middlebrow, it is also apparent that there are no solid definitions of lowbrow or highbrow either. Each one is inevitably relational. To focus on the highbrow for now, it seems to be intimately connected with the concept of 'literary fiction', or, rather, those who dismiss 'middlebrow' as inadequate and intellectually lacking in value tend to criticise it for *not being* literary fiction (such as Indyk 2015 and Macdonald 2011). Definitions of 'literary fiction' are equally lacking, in a multi-layered lack of clarity around terms like these, which are frequently in use but rarely explicitly explained. Humble (2001: 11) says in relation to the middlebrow of the 1920s and 1930s that 'the middlebrow novel is one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other'. The word 'straddling' here is a helpful reminder of this middlebrow 'in-betweenness', and that 'challenging' is perhaps the most productive word for a definition of highbrow literary fiction. In discussions of it, ideas of 'difficulty' recur. Will Self's (2014) view of the state of the twenty-first-century

novel interlinks with this when he writes: ‘Literary fiction used to be central to the culture. No more: [...] the very idea of “difficult” reading is being challenged’, and he thereby makes ‘literary fiction’ and ‘difficult’ fiction synonymous. Meredith Jaffe (2015), meanwhile, writes of the ‘impenetrability’ of literary fiction, mobilising a similar sense that it is ‘difficult’, and frustrated by the ‘bad writing’ that she sees as producing this impenetrability, compared to the implied ‘good’ writing of the middlebrow. These are newspaper critics—Self is Professor of Contemporary Thought at Brunel University, but this article is in *The Guardian*—and their role, therefore, as I hinted above, in defining middlebrow literary culture is yet more significant: they are part of middlebrow *institutions*, which include book prizes and book clubs, as well as newspapers and literary reviews, according to Beth Driscoll (2014: 25). Newspaper reviews sections, and newspaper critics, are part of the cultural drive towards ‘packaging’ literature for middlebrow readers, advising them on which (middlebrow) texts to read. But even from a more academic perspective, the details of literary fiction often remain hazy; in defining the middlebrow against it and in relation to it, even Driscoll fails to come up with a clear identification of what she means by ‘elite’ culture, or ‘literary fiction’.

Assuming that difficulty/impenetrability has something to do with how we define ‘literary fiction’, Waters is definitively *not it*. Her accessibility and interpretability are key to her novels’ participation in the neo-historical aesthetic—and to their middlebrowness. This is partly how I define Waters’s ‘literariness’, a term I do not use in an early formalist ‘defamiliarisation’ of language sense (Bennett 2003: 34-35), but rather to refer to these tropes, such as the associations between Kay and gloom/half-light/shadows that persistently draw attention to the fictionality of these narratives, and thus, in a postmodern sense, the fact that they *are* narratives. Using such conspicuous fictional devices acts as a reminder, following White, that these narratives are constructed by an author, and thus can always only give limited access to any kind of historical ‘truth’. Richard Todd’s (1996: 224-228) now somewhat dated analysis of middlebrow institution The Man Booker Prize (though he does not term it middlebrow) considers texts that have layers of meaning; he reads Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988), for example, as literary fiction because there are hidden depths to uncover within it—it requires interpretation, but is not necessarily inaccessible. This seems like a limited definition of ‘literary fiction’ in the context of others’ views of it—i.e. it is not ‘difficult’ or ‘impenetrable’—but it is instead the kind of middlebrow ‘literariness’ that I see in Waters’s works. The novels require interpretation, but that interpretation is relatively straightforward—again going back to



the assumed cultural capital of the middlebrow reader—and, while it requires a certain level of engagement and knowledge, it is not ‘formally challenging’ to a middlebrow reader. The novels’ ‘literariness’ thus invites readers to engage in acts of interpretation. Crucially for my discussion, this interpretation is *easy*—Waters frequently repeats her tropes, and, as in the examples quoted above, makes them almost explicit through this repetition and through their broadly straightforward implications.

Humble (2001: 32) writes of *I Capture the Castle*, a text that she sees as archetypal of the middlebrow of the mid-twentieth century, that it manages: ‘the classic middlebrow balancing act between the low pleasures of romance and simple narrative fulfilment and more elaborate intellectual satisfactions’. This is what Waters’s novels achieve too. Her lesbian romances offer a titillating pleasure for a reader, with many of them having relatively normatively ‘happy’ (i.e. dyadic couplings of key characters) endings, and those that do not end ‘happily’ still often have the thrill of romantic pursuit. In the former category, we have *Tipping the Velvet*, for example, culminating in Nancy choosing between her first love and her newfound partner; in the latter category we have the much more challenging (and sad) romances of *The Night Watch*. However, the narrative of *The Night Watch* still has various narrative thrills, such as Helen and Julia’s developing passion in the middle section. The fact that these are *lesbian* romances is relevant too: as Humble (2001: 14) writes of Rosamond Lehman’s *Dusty Answer* (1927 [2006]), ‘its lesbian content [...] offered the reader the reassurance of being up-to-the-minute’. This demonstrates that the texts of these novels might suggest how readers approach them, and how they position themselves in relation to the content of the texts. Given the conspicuously mainstream popularity of Waters’s works, there is still, ironically, a sense for the middlebrow readership that reading a still comparatively uncommon lesbian romance, rather than heterosexual one, has the reassurance of non-heteronormative and therefore ‘daring’ politics (Humble 2001: 14). Indeed, Humble (2001: 14) also discusses the fact that, in general, and in contrast to Lehman’s novel, (hetero-)romance was felt to have ‘regrettably lowbrow associations (worryingly close to the sort of thing shop-girls read in magazines)’. A lesbian romance, and especially a historically politicised one, is quite different from the normativity of the hetero-lowbrow—comparable, perhaps, to judgements passed on Mills and Boon novels in the present day. This is one way in which Waters’s romances are able to retain their middlebrow status rather than having ‘regrettably lowbrow associations’.

Following that quotation from Humble on ‘the classic middlebrow balancing act’, it is also part of Waters’s participation in the middlebrow that she creates compelling narrative

drive in her novels, and she has a variety of methods for doing this. *Tipping the Velvet*, for example, has the narrative drive of the bildungsroman, with our emotional commitment to Nancy driving the narrative forward, where *Fingersmith* (2002) is full of compelling Gothic plot twists. The reverse chronology of *The Night Watch* enables a series of personal and private mysteries to unfold as we learn not what is going to happen next, but what has already happened, to bring characters to their ‘present’—i.e. 1947—state. The implications of this for an interpretation of the neo-historical aesthetic are manifold, but ultimately, the structure of the novel means that its narrative drive comes from always looking backwards, from creating a heritage for the mysteries of the present. This is a useful articulation of how we understand the neo-historical aesthetic in general: it invents heritages for the present, and particularly for aspects of the present that are marginalised from canonical or grand narrative history.

For example, in the 1947 section of *The Night Watch*, we learn from Helen’s perspective on Viv that: ‘She never spoke of having lost a lover to the war, but there was something—something disappointed about her’ (Waters 2006: 18). Of course, losing a lover in the war is an obvious example of disappointment in this period, and Helen’s assumptions of this as a likely reason for Viv’s demeanour remind us of the widespread pain of the postwar setting. However, Helen also has difficulty even locating the word ‘disappointment’, as suggested by the hesitation: ‘something—something’. Evidently, Viv’s personal history is unclear to her friend and colleague—to the extent that even her apparent emotions about it are hard to define. This mystery, and Helen’s curiosity about it, characterise our perspective on Viv in the 1947 section. Other comments about her seem connected to it in some way, such as when Viv sees Kay in the street:

*Hush, Vivien*, Viv remembered her saying. The memory was stark, after all this time—stark and terrible—the grip of her hand, the closeness of her mouth. *Vivien, hush*. (Waters 2006: 76; original emphasis)

There is the potential here for a very wide range of experiences to be conveyed. This could be a sexual memory—‘the grip of her hand, the closeness of her mouth’; although we know that Viv is in a relationship with Reggie in 1947, she may also have a history with Kay. It could be a memory of violence done to Viv by Kay—‘stark and terrible’, but this seems unlikely from what we know of Kay. Or it could be a memory of a shared trauma—we know these two women were in London during the Blitz, perhaps Kay’s ‘*Hush, Vivien*’ is to protect her. The mystery here is intriguing, and is one of many similar ambiguities that drive the narrative in the 1944 section, as we seek the explanation for the

circumstances we have already read in 1947. Indeed, it is significant that when the mystery is resolved—ambulance drivers Kay and Mickey take Viv to hospital when her backstreet abortion goes terribly wrong—it is unlikely to be something that the reader could have predicted, giving a different experience of narrative fulfilment and resolution to a more straightforward chronology. *The Night Watch*, then, offers a case study for the middlebrow neo-historical aesthetic, both in terms of its project and its middlebrowness, with the narrative structure of the novel offering this pursuit of a ‘heritage’ for a certain moment in time.

That word ‘heritage’ is important, having, as it often does in the UK, associations with English Heritage, a middlebrow institution, which (in its broadest terms) packages artefacts and histories predominantly of the wealthy in a consumable way for the visitors of castles and monuments. Crucially, however, despite these middlebrow associations, ‘heritage’ is not necessarily imbricated in linear structures of history, unlike terms such as ‘genealogy’ or, obviously, ‘lineage’. I discuss in the next chapter the limitations that the linearity of genealogical ‘straight time’ imposes on a neo-historical narrative—and the ghostly ways in which these novels seek to evade rigidly linear chronologies, via the work of Elizabeth Freeman and Valerie Rohy. ‘Heritage’ offers an alternative pinpointing of specific historical moments to this linearity, and it articulates relationships between past and present that do not necessarily rely on simplistic narrative coherence. With all its middlebrow associations, then, ‘heritage’ still offers a different kind of relationship to narrative that, in resisting the linearity of other, similar terms, perhaps fits better with a post-postmodern, neo-historical project. Heritage is more commonly used in a factual than a fictional context, but it has value for articulating fictional histories as well, and offers a useful terminology for those histories that we see being developed (particularly those for the historically marginalised) in the neo-historical aesthetic. In the way I have defined the post-postmodernism of the neo-historical aesthetic, it seeks to unite postmodernism with a pre-postmodern relationship to narrative, and, as such, it is itself non-chronological, resisting a straightforward development from past to present. The middlebrow implications of ‘heritage’, and its use in this context, thus reinforce the centrality of the middlebrow to the neo-historical invention of history.

Waters’s novels share ‘the low pleasures of romance and simple narrative fulfilment’—even when that fulfilment is non-chronologically narratively presented—with early-twentieth-century middlebrow texts, but, as I have discussed, there are also ‘more elaborate intellectual satisfactions’ in their recurrent interpretable tropes. However, I

would go further than Humble to point out that these intellectual satisfactions, in Waters's case, also rely on not being *too* challenging—in Waters's version of the middlebrow there is no 'satisfaction' in a profoundly challenging and perhaps unsolvable problem. The obviousness of this potential for interpretation goes beyond just a participation in the tropes of middlebrow fiction; it is also about the explicit fictionality of Waters's novels. To take another example, in *The Night Watch*, Waters (2006: 7) explores the empty physical spaces of London that are the consequence of the war; Kay's house 'still had the scars either side where it had been attached to its neighbours, the zig-zag of phantom staircases and the dints of absent hearths'. The metaphor of the scars is very evident, not only referring to the injured human bodies of wartime, but also the emotional scars of grief and loss that fill characters' lives (Duncan's, Viv's brother, in this case, as this is his perspective of the house's scars). Similarly, we have: 'The bomb had landed on a feather mattress underneath and made a crater: it looked like an ulcerated leg'; use of the word 'gutted' with reference to a church; and more. These body/building associations culminate with the image of Helen stuck in rubble 'covered in a film of plaster, and buried up to the waist', making the metaphor literal (Waters 2006: 277, 364, 494). As with the half-light, the repetition of these architectural and bodily metaphors for the physical and emotional consequences of war is startlingly conspicuous, to the point of being heavy-handed. How very obvious they are makes the fact that this is a literary narrative also very apparent.

We can refer back, here, to the work of Hayden White (1975: 1, 3n.4), and his postmodern argument that 'factual' historical narrative has a 'fictive character', i.e. it is constructed in many of the same ways as fiction; White explains 'the "artistic" elements of a "realistic" historiography'. Diana Wallace (2005: x-xi) describes this as 'The postmodern recognition that both history and fiction are constructed discourses which have a complex relation to what we call "reality"'. Of course, all historical fiction is carefully crafted, and is full of interpretable literary tropes. Indeed, this is the point of White's argument, that 'factual' history resembles fiction in this way. However, the middlebrow conspicuousness of Waters's tropes is striking—they work to subtly emphasise their constructedness in response to the postmodern discourses that White raises. As a knowing nudge to those middlebrow readers who are aware of the impact of postmodernism on understandings of history as constructed discourse, Waters's conspicuous repetition of tropes emphasises that this is a version of history—like all versions of history—that can only be accessed through her carefully crafted narrative.

This fictionality is another point of comparison between the neo-historical aesthetic and its predecessor, historiographic metafiction. The latter explicitly foregrounds its own status as ‘fiction’, and through this, historiographic metafictional novels also draw attention to the impossibility of accessing the ‘truth’ about the past through any kind of narrative. In moving beyond historiographic metafiction, however, the neo-historical aesthetic is inventing histories that are accessible and readable—and that offer narrative fulfilment and interpretable literariness, evident in Waters’s novels, rather than participating in the postmodern refusal of the conventions of narrative altogether. Linda Hutcheon (1988: 93) uses a similar phrasing to Diana Wallace in her definition of historiographic metafiction, arguing:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity.

In this sense, there are notable similarities between what Waters is doing in *The Night Watch* and what Hutcheon sees as the defining features of historiographic metafiction. Both address the problematic of assertions of ‘truth’ in history by demonstrating the constructedness of their fictions. This is why, as I said in the previous chapter, I read the neo-historical aesthetic as not a straightforward break from the work of historiographic metafiction, but rather as growing out of and inextricably linked to it, like post-postmodernism and postmodernism (and like postmodernism’s relationship to modernism, as Hutcheon [1988: 88] puts it: ‘paradoxical postmodernism is both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to modernism’).

Of course, the fact that Waters has cleaved a previously unavailable space for such explicit and middlebrow mainstream lesbian fiction is central to any understanding of her novels. As Waters explores in her article with Laura Doan, lesbian historical fiction prior to and even concurrent with Jeanette Winterson’s work—especially *Sexing the Cherry* (1981 [2014]) and *The Passion*—was fraught with problematically ahistorical limitations. This was true of Isabel Miller’s *Patience and Sarah* (2005; first published as *A Place for Us* [1969]) and Penny Hayes’s *Yellowthroat* (1988), for example. Winterson’s fictional lesbian histories, then, are also located on this complex trajectory from postmodern to post-postmodern articulations of history. The final line to her challengingly metafictional and magic realist

novel, *The Passion* (1988: 160), is 'I'm telling you stories. Trust me'. Winterson makes explicit the problematic unreliability of her narrators (Henri and Villanelle) throughout the text, persistently making clear that their partiality and subjectivity make their narratives fundamentally unreliable; she emphasises the 'human construct' of this narrative, and never permits a clear or common-sense distinction between fact and fiction. Winterson metafictionally declares, with this simple concluding phrase, that we actually *cannot* trust grand narrative history/stories, and that so much of our relationship to narrative relies on emotional connections to narrators. In contrast, even where Waters's novels have similarly uncertain narrators, they always ultimately offer a final and conclusive narrative of the fictional 'truth'.

In *The Passion*, Winterson's playful uncertainties culminate with this final, oft-quoted line, in which we are asked to commit wholeheartedly—'trust me'—to the unreliable uncertainty of this textual product, to the explicit fiction of being told a story. Winterson's novels exceed the parameters of the neo-historical aesthetic, but, tellingly, they also exceed the middlebrow. To go back to Will Self's definition of literary fiction, Winterson's novels are, in many ways, 'difficult'; they resist categorisation and do not have the simple narrative drive and accessibility of all of Waters's novels. In this sense, and put unfairly simply, Winterson is a highbrow writer, whereas Waters is middlebrow. Waters has been instrumental in creating novels that are among the first accessible, successful in the mainstream but 'respectable' (in other words, not lowbrow pulp like *Yellowthroat*) lesbian (neo-)historical fictions. In an interpretation of Waters's work, it is essential to acknowledge the role that she has played in bringing intellectually-engaged lesbian historical fiction into the mainstream. This is not to say that Winterson's work has not been widely read and appreciated; she has also—in a different way—contributed significantly to the development of lesbian histories, in both her fiction and her memoirs. However, Waters's middlebrow text does this work of historical invention through the range of easily interpretable literary tropes. In *The Passion*, Winterson, in contrast, rejects conventional historical narrative in favour of a metafictional (and at times 'difficult'), broadly postmodern invention of a historical lesbian love story.

My argument here is not intended to suggest that Waters's narrative fulfilment, at least in *The Night Watch*, results in overly simplistic linearity—and, in some ways, this novel does resist closure. Various storylines do not 'end' with the end of the novel, so much as get traced back to their beginnings.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, *The Night Watch* does still, partly, participate in a postmodern resistance to narrative certainty: Waters is, after all, 'telling us

stories' too. However, this structure provides a broadly simplistic form of (albeit non-chronological) narrative fulfilment, i.e. the structure that Humble positions as part of the middlebrow. It would be incorrect to suggest that *The Passion* lacks narrative drive, but the 'simple pleasures of narrative fulfilment' and the romance plot are both hugely complicated by the unreliable narrative and uncertain magic realist tropes; Villanelle's webbed feet allow her to literally walk on water, and she does so to narrative-defining effect in the penultimate section of this complex novel. We can also see from this analysis how the problems produced by a postmodern relationship to narrative are played out and, to a certain degree, resolved in the middlebrow neo-historical aesthetic. Waters's novel, in all its middlebrowness, demonstrates a clear awareness of the problems of narrative representation after postmodernism. In a sense, the 'difficult' literary fiction of historiographic metafiction is not destabilised by postmodern deconstructions of narrative capacities for truth. 'I'm telling you stories. Trust me' accepts and embraces the newly contested state of 'truth', but offers nothing in its place, except perhaps the endless, metafictional untrustworthiness of emotional storytelling: the unreliable fictionality of Henri and Villanelle's stories *is* the new fictional history in postmodernism. Waters's narrative, in contrast, is about seeking certainties—dependable heritages—for the 'present', with the 1947 section acting as a cipher for the present day, as we non-chronologically try to understand the circumstances that led to it. It offers a new version of truth, explicitly through fiction, a self-contradictory, post-postmodern truth that depends heavily on a commitment to the narrative in which it appears, even as that narrative is shown to be self-referentially fictional via a range of very explicit literary devices. These commitments towards interpretable accessibility and narrative certainty are integral to the neo-historical aesthetic, and they go some way towards demonstrating how the aesthetic is inherently middlebrow.

Unlike its 'highbrow' generic predecessor, the neo-historical aesthetic requires this accessible, middlebrow narrative fulfilment to actually create new narratives about the past, rather than—as in Winterson's novel's case—persistently foregrounding the fundamental unreliability of historical narrative. The neo-historical aesthetic, while it acknowledges the postmodern impossibility of reliable narratives about the past, both grows out of and reverts to a moment before historiographic metafiction, allowing the explicit fictionality of these novels to create narratively entertaining and fulfilling fictional histories. The texts in which the neo-historical aesthetic appears deliberately resist Self's 'difficulty', where historiographic metafiction did not. So, as well as being too political for

the lowbrow, the neo-historical aesthetic is inevitably too accessible, too narratively straightforward to be 'highbrow'. It is, instead, necessarily middlebrow.

### **The liminal and middle-class middlebrow and *The Paying Guests***

This obviousness of the interpretability of metaphors and tropes is also visible in *The Paying Guests*, and my argument in this next section focuses on the novel's recurrent representation of liminality and in-betweenness, particularly in relation to class. One of Beth Driscoll's (2014: 17) eight features of the middlebrow points out: 'the middlebrow is middle-class'. All of Waters's novels deal directly with class in the versions of the past that she creates, from the socialist activism at the end of *Tipping the Velvet*, to the crises experienced by her family when wealthy Margaret goes to visit inmates at the prison in *Affinity* (1999), to the swapping at birth of two babies from profoundly different class backgrounds in *Fingersmith*. However, it is in her later-set novels, with the emergent and shifting middle-classes in the wakes of the two world wars, that the middle class in particular becomes one of Waters's primary focuses. This is especially the case in *The Paying Guests*. In this section, I will further argue that the middle-class nature of the middlebrow positions it as firmly 'in between' (like Kay), with the obvious repetition of the trope of liminality also acting as a metaphor for the neo-historical aesthetic itself. The fact that *The Paying Guests* is set between the wars is also significant for this. I will further demonstrate that the middlebrow represents the same simultaneously present-focused and backward-looking impulse as the neo-historical aesthetic, in its invention of lesbian histories in accessible narratives, which influences the politics of those lesbian histories themselves, circumscribing them to a narrow location.

Driscoll's rhetorical construct—'the middlebrow is middle-class'—makes the very 'middleness' of both very conspicuous. As I indicated above, it is important to note something here that Driscoll does not: when talking about the middle class in this context, and in the context of Waters's novels, it is very much a *white* middle-class experience. The complexity of a racial, or post-racial, experience of class does not come into Driscoll's field of view in her important critical work on the twenty-first-century middlebrow. Indeed, in general, race is a glaring absence in current definitions of the middlebrow, especially as, I would argue, this is a central aspect of how the middlebrow exists in contemporary culture. Even if the middlebrow might *now* be argued to include authors and characters of colour, as well as non-white audiences, the experiences of all of these participants in middlebrow culture, whether as creators or consumers, will inevitably be



fundamentally different from the power-status of the white (implicitly Antipodean/European/North American) middle class. Waters's having been defined as a 'lesbian writer'—with critical analyses focusing on her lesbian content—also problematically fails to acknowledge the other implicit structures of power that underpin her writing, the structures of power that we might define as being *historically* part of the middlebrow. In all of her novels (except *The Little Stranger*, owing to its previously mentioned lack of lesbian characters), the lesbian histories that Waters imagines are populated exclusively by white characters, and the vast majority of them, especially in *The Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests* (Kay, Helen, Julia, Frances, even Lilian in her crossing of the class boundary), are middle class. However, because of this content of Waters's novels, I too have focused and will continue to focus on white and British middlebrow culture in this chapter—with an awareness of the problems of this model of critical engagement.

Within this discussion of her mainstream, middle-class middlebrowness, it is also necessary to be aware of Waters's readership, although without doing large-scale surveys, it is difficult to define the demographic accurately. Events around the novels can be informative. For example, *The Paying Guests* was launched at an event organised by the magazine *Stylist* in August 2014, in a 'Stylist Book Club' event. *Stylist* is a free, popular magazine, predominantly disseminated on public transport in large cities—at London tube stations and Manchester tram stops, for example—and in high street shops. It is broadly (and only implicitly) aimed at heterosexual cis-women, and it has a left-leaning and self-promoted 'inclusive' stance such that the magazine reviews beauty products aimed at people of all races, skin tones, and hair types, for example. Each issue of the magazine contains a letter from the editor that expects an (intimate public) identification from readers, and authors of articles recurrently use the word 'we' to denote the connection between reader(-consumer) and writer. It contains reviews and endorsements of products that rely on broadly feminine gender presentations amongst the readership and (interestingly given that this is a free magazine) that require a high disposable income to be purchasable. *Stylist* is a profoundly middlebrow institution—feminised and middle-class—and its interest in reading and its literary events form a substantial part of this.

*Stylist* makes clear its interest in contemporary literature, with articles comparing new releases each week, and *Stylist* reading lists available online—'12 powerful dystopian novels that every woman should read' etc (Dray 2016, and in general, see *Stylist* n.d.). This different organising background for a launch is evidence of a changing relationship to

literature in contemporary culture. Not part of a somewhat removed institution—a publishing house—the launch was associated with an explicitly (cis-)feminised publication, and one that relies on an apparently intimate and friendly connection with its readership/audience. As mentioned, the magazine has developed protocols to avoid an overly white focus, particularly in its beauty section (Eddo-Lodge 2015), but—anecdotally—the audience members at the launch itself were almost exclusively white women. The magazine avoids the explicit compulsory heterosexuality of many of its peers—there are no *Cosmopolitan* sex tips on ‘30 ways to please a man’ here (Cosmo Frank 2014, and there are many more similar articles available at the *Cosmopolitan* website). However, the examples it gives in its relationship-focused articles are still generally heterosexual (Hoyle n.d.). That the launch for *The Paying Guests* was organised through this broadly heterosexual and middlebrow—white (if the launch was representative), middle-class, emotional—institution reinforces not only the middlebrowness of Waters’s work, but also its white middle-class status. These white and middle-class elements of Waters’s work have broadly been unacknowledged in critical analyses. This might predominantly speak to the hegemonic status of the white middle class in literary culture in general. However, in this specific case, in writing her lesbian neo-histories, Waters is also, implicitly, writing the lesbian into an explicitly white and middle-class history. In consuming these texts—in large numbers, with more than 100 attending the launch—we see how a middle-class, middlebrow readership maintain this post-postmodern commitment to easily consumable narrative, even in the context of Waters’s explorations of the gaps in history that postmodernism produced.

Driscoll (2014: 18) writes, ‘Historically [the middle class] has been defined against the aristocracy with its inherited wealth on one side, and the physical labourers of the working class on the other’. This suggests that, like the middlebrow, the middle class has been defined by association with what it is *not*: with not being manual labourers and not being ‘old money’. The middle class, like the middlebrow, is in between. Therefore, the middle class is liminal, the middlebrow is liminal, and the liminal becomes a conspicuously recurrent image in Waters’s novels. This is raised to new heights when liminal spaces conspicuously become the locus of a large portion of the action at least for the first half of *The Paying Guests*, with landings, corridors, staircases, and hallways acting as the key spaces of emotional and interpersonal experience, while the novel’s interwar setting gives a strong sense of both an omnipresent past and a looming future (see my discussion of

proleptic irony in the next chapter). On this interwar context, Alison Light (1991: 2) writes:

How much people felt what we now know to be their future pressing upon them, how far they lived in expectation or in suspense, reading in the entrails of the present signs of what was to come, and how far they were moved by the forms of their past, aware of it as loss, as comfort, or as an invisible force in their lives, are questions which modern historians ask themselves.

She thereby makes clear that this in-between the wars state, even when explicitly unknown to people, may have had implicit consequences for individuals' lived experiences in this period.

Light's (1991: 6) thesis on 'the relatively unexamined mainstream of English cultural life amongst the middle classes at home between the wars' has much relevance to my discussions of *The Paying Guests* (like Castle's apparitional lesbian, it rather seems to haunt Waters's text): 'It is extraordinary how much the literary history of "the inter-war years" [...] has been rendered almost exclusively in male terms', she argues, and she sets out to consider, instead, the literary, middlebrow emphasis on class and the domestic in women's writing. She emphasises the new role of women after the First World War, in which 'the female population [...] became, statistically, and, [...] in some ways symbolically too, the nation between the wars', and suggests that, alongside this, the trauma of the war led to a new emphasis on 'private life'. Through this and other arguments, Light (1991: 210) emphasises this period's conservatism. The temporal in-betweenness of the setting, then, is heavily loaded with a set of gendered and middlebrow implications.

In *The Paying Guests*, the emphasis on the in-betweenness, on liminality, runs from the first subtle, friendly, cross-class intimacy between Frances and Lilian, to the encroaching and unappealing presence of Leonard in Frances's life, and to the high drama of dragging a body down the staircase when the novel takes a surprising generic turn towards a crime/courtroom drama (Waters 2014: 25, 52, 328). As I quoted in the title of this chapter, Frances, in describing her relationship with her lodgers to her friend Christina, even says: 'We pass each other on the stairs. We meet on the landing. Everything happens on the landing. I had no idea that landings could be so thrilling' (Waters 2014: 42). The 'thrilling' landings and liminality are extremely conspicuous in the text.

In the first evening after the Barbers move in, Frances is walking up the stairs towards the landing that she will share with them:

But if only, she thought, as she began to climb—she hadn't thought it in ages—if only, if only she might turn the stair and find one of her brothers at the top—John Arthur, say, looking lean, looking bookish, looking like a whimsical monk in his brown Jaeger dressing-gown and Garden City sandals.

There was no one save Mr Barber, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, his jacket off, his cuffs rolled back; he was fiddling with a nasty thing he had evidently just hung on the landing wall, a combination barometer-and-clothes-brush set with a lurid orangey varnish. But lurid touches were everywhere, she saw with dismay. (Waters 2014: 17-18)

The repeated 'if only' indicates the powerful wistfulness of Frances's thoughts here; as she repeats it again and again, it becomes increasingly apparent that she knows the impossibility of her hope. That she longs to see her brother as she 'turns the stair' suggests the apparent, but already failed, powerful potential of this liminal space to represent change. It is an especially fraught space now, as well, because it has just become shared, not with a beloved family member, but with strangers. Mr Barber is in his casual attire. He lacks John Arthur's dressing gown, and indeed the 'Garden City' sandals, that implicitly associate Frances's brother with a certain historical group, suggesting that he was a kind of proto-hippy, part of a set of people interested in Fabianism, women's suffrage, and vegetarianism ('Alternative Letchworth' 2016-2017; Kennedy 2016). Frances's characterisation of John Arthur is also a sharp reminder of her family's class position, with the 'bookish', 'whimsical monk' acting as a sharply intellectual counterpoint to the 'lurid' Barbers, i.e. to the visual effects of the new additions to the décor. Their differences in cultural capital are thus made apparent. Plus, Mr Barber has 'his jacket off, his cuffs rolled back', which reinforces the new but limited intimacy that the landing, as shared space, represents. These are two middle classes coming into contact—Frances represents the once-wealthy, home-owning, upper-middle class, and the Barbers represent the lower-middle 'clerk class'. This disdainful comment about their 'lurid' décor is a reminder of Stevie's 'doilies and antimacassars' quoted earlier, and it draws attention to Frances's sense of her own class superiority. I would argue that this disdain towards perceived 'low' culture is implicit in Driscoll's (2014: 21-23) definition of the middlebrow as 'reverential towards high culture'. This landing space, from early in the novel, evidently becomes freighted with meaning and tension, and is the locus of many revealing moments.

In Rachel Cusk's (2014) review of *The Paying Guests* in *The Guardian*, she writes: 'In this newly fragmented world, people traditionally separated by money and social status find their lives haplessly intermingling: ingress is a common theme of the literature of the period'. By 'the period', she here means the 1920s, when the novel is set, and she is drawing links between Waters's portrayal of that period and its middlebrow literature. There is certainly a sense of haplessness to Frances's initial responses to the Barbers, as she is persistently surprised and distressed by their presence in the house: 'A movement at the turn of the staircase made her start. She had forgotten all about her lodgers'; 'I'm afraid I made a mistake [in taking in the "paying guests"]'. No, she wouldn't think that!'; 'Frances was startled to hear the rattle of the front-door latch as someone let themselves into the house. It was Mr Barber, of course' (Waters 2014: 25, 21, 29). Evidently, Frances is constantly surprised by and finds it difficult to deal with her own change in circumstances (i.e. her and her mother's reduced financial situation), represented by the Barbers' conspicuous presence in her home. Although not the same as liminality, Cusk's reference to 'ingress' is pertinent. She argues that these images of boundaries being crossed are a crucial part of the middlebrow literature of the early twentieth century, with so much social change in process: 'ingress is a common theme of the literature of the period, as privileged people are forced to recognise that the damaged class-barrier no longer offers them protection from a nebulous modern chaos whose source appears to be the lower orders'. Ingress, that image of invasive presence, is certainly connected to liminality, as boundaries are crossed and traversed. It is present in *The Paying Guests* in its own right, with the two most striking examples being the ingresses of the Barbers' noise and Leonard's repeated, and unwelcome, pausing in the kitchen when he goes to use the toilet outside (Waters 2014: 21, 33, 30, 56).

However, liminality is perhaps a more generous word for Waters's articulation of some similar ground to the invasive concept of Cusk's 'ingress', and is thus perhaps evidence for a more present-day attitude that *The Paying Guests* holds to the 'people traditionally separated by money and social status' than the 1920s literature to which Cusk refers. Frances and Lilian face interpersonal and social problems as a consequence of their difference in class backgrounds, but, rather than feeling invaded or encroached upon by Lilian (unlike Leonard), Frances learns to use the liminal space to find mutual ground. So, in their first meeting alone, Lilian uncertainly descends the staircase towards Frances, who is on her knees, polishing the floor, 'a well-bred woman doing the work of a char'. In this interaction, Frances works hard to make Lilian 'smile at last' and to find common, friendly

ground (Waters 2014: 25). Although there *is* hapless ‘intermingling’, here, Frances finds ways, by joking with Lilian, to put aside their ‘traditional separation’, as Cusk puts it, and to calm any anxiety that ‘ingress’ is taking place. Distressed at the idea that Frances must clean the hall floor because of mess that she and Leonard created when moving their possessions into their new home, Lilian offers to finish the work for Frances, who replies, ‘You’ll do nothing of the sort. You’ve your own rooms to care for. If you can manage without a maid, why shouldn’t I?’ (Waters 2014: 25) Although ‘your own rooms’ might seem like an effort to push Lilian into her own domestic space and away from Frances’s parts of the house, or, indeed, to absolve Lilian of responsibility for this shared, liminal space, and thus claim it as uniquely hers, Frances is in fact working to emphasise that their domestic experiences are very similar—and to assert her comfort with Lilian’s ownership of space within the ‘heart of her house’. She creates a communion between them over domestic responsibilities, and as such, makes the liminal space of the staircase into a point of shared warmth rather than implicitly violent ingress.

Waters is taking the tropes of the much earlier middlebrow and developing them for a contemporary readership, and Cusk specifically talks about *The Paying Guests* as a middlebrow novel. The middlebrow of the twenty-first century interacts in a number of complex ways with that of the 1920s, but for my purposes in this chapter, it is the 1920s middlebrow’s relationship to modernism that makes them distinct—and we might think again here of the oddly chronological ways in which postmodernism is devoted and resistant to modernism, just as post-postmodernism is devoted and resistant to postmodernism. Alison Light (1991: 6), quoted above, emphasises how the ‘careless masculinity’ of, among other things, ‘high modernism’ has structured our understanding of the interwar period. And Humble (2001: 14-15) argues that the 1920s middlebrow ran parallel to what she sees as the exclusionary masculinity of modernism—both of its authors and its consumers: ‘There is a sense in which all women’s writing of the period in question (with the standard exception of Virginia Woolf) was treated as middlebrow’ (which Woolf would presumably have been relieved to hear), and ‘it is largely because particular novels were read by women that they were downgraded’ to a middlebrow status. She is also keen to emphasise the link between the middlebrow of this period and the realist novels of the previous century: ‘It is not (as many critics would have us assume) that novelists, and particularly female novelists, suddenly started writing meretricious, class-obsessed fripperies in the years after the First World War’ (Humble 2001: 11), but rather that the arrival of modernism changed the literary landscape. The twenty-first-

century middlebrow is similarly resistant to some of the more highbrow deconstructions of literary *postmodernism*, at least in the context of historiographic metafiction, as I discussed above.

Rather than considering the contemporary middlebrowness of the novel, however, Cusk (2014) suggests that Waters here gives her readers a ‘pastiche’ of the 1920s middlebrow—important, of course, because this is the period in which the novel is set, so comparing the two speaks to Waters’s evident homage to a particular literary and historical moment. This is a convincing argument, up to a point, but there are problems with Cusk’s use of the word ‘pastiche’. The word is taken up from Cusk’s article by Adele Jones and Claire O’Callaghan in their recent edited collection, *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms* (2016: 219):

If middlebrow fiction can be simply characterised as women’s narratives of the domestic and of romance (though it is also much more), then *The Paying Guests* is precisely a middlebrow pastiche which allows Waters to lift the roof off a typically middle-class house to examine what lies beneath.

There are problems here with characterising the middlebrow as ‘simply’ domestic and romantic fiction. While Jones and O’Callaghan do agree that it is ‘much more’, their desire to also read it in this more reductive way, even temporarily, is troubling. There is also tension here between the idea that *The Paying Guests* is a pastiche, while it simultaneously ‘uncover[s] and articulate[s] the subversive nature of the desire bubbling under the surface of the house on Champion Hill’ (Jones and O’Callaghan 2016: 219). To be a pastiche, in the Jamesonian (1991: 17) sense of ‘blank parody’, requires the novel to directly replicate the structures and politics of the 1920s middlebrow. To suggest that it can do this while also ‘lift[ing] the roof’ does not quite follow. This contradictory argument about 1920s pastiche is a less convincing argument than the many productive and challenging contradictions I identify as being integral to the middlebrow and the neo-historical aesthetic.

My use of Nicola Humble’s work in this chapter does suggest that there are many points of crossover between the formulation of two distinct literary middlebrows in the two periods, the 1920s and the present—and indeed between all of Waters’s novels and twentieth-century middlebrow novels, although the content of *The Paying Guests* makes this an especially apt comparison. However, Waters’s self-aware and explicitly present-produced text does not allow for the ‘blank parody’ of simply recreating its middlebrow predecessor of 1920s fiction.

This example of the shift from ingress to liminality is a useful one for understanding the difference here, as Waters approaches the class crisis that Frances and Lilian face in this encounter on the stairs, but she takes a more critically-engaged approach to it than Humble (2001: 28) finds in a number of 1920s characters' and novels' 'hypersensitivity to the minutiae of class distinctions'. Light (1991: 215) similarly emphasises the 'distinctions within the middle classes' in the interwar period, focused on 'who might count as people "like us"', which 'were at least as preoccupying as perceptions of easily recognised "inferiors"'. Waters's characters are caught in challenging class positions, fraught with meaning and tension, and they are persistently aware of this, but they do not straightforwardly replicate this hypersensitivity to the minutiae that appear to govern the environments they inhabit. While Frances's mother is clearly disturbed by the fact that Lilian and Leonard are not 'people "like us"', Frances is not. As Frances finds herself 'doing the work of a char', her main concern, as I have said, is to create communion between herself and Lilian, to brush aside these 'minutiae'. Waters therefore uses the middlebrow preoccupations of her texts to demonstrate their simultaneous participation in the middlebrow of the twenty-first century and that of the early twentieth century. This conjoining of two temporal moments, recurrent in the neo-historical aesthetic, brings together two temporally distinct middlebrows.

It is essential to the middlebrowness of the novel that this first shared and private moment between the two women revolves around the domestic. Humble (2001: 5) writes of early-twentieth-century literary middlebrow preoccupations with 'the middle-class woman's anxiety about her new responsibility for domestic labour'. While there is a sense in the novel that Frances has been through this anxiety, it is now more a weary pressure for her; on seeing Lilian's horror at her cleaning the floor, 'Frances knew the look very well—she was bored to death with it, in fact' (Waters 2014: 25). To Frances, this is not a 'new responsibility', at least not in a personal sense, but it is a frustration, and a longstanding burden. When dusting:

Just occasionally, she longed to take each fiddly porcelain cup and saucer and break it in two. Once, in sheer frustration, she had snapped off the head of one of the apple-cheeked Staffordshire figures: it still sat a little crookedly from where she had hurriedly glued it back on. (Waters 2014: 24)

This expression of frustration and her evident exhaustion with the 'endless dusting' (Waters 2014: 23) manifest themselves in private expressions of irritation. However, the fact that Frances 'hurriedly glued back on' the head of the figurine is a reminder of what



Jones and O'Callaghan (2016: 218) call 'the ever-watchful eye of the Victorian mother figure', likening Mrs Wray to the oppressive Mrs Prior in *Affinity* (and see also Light [1991: 32-33] on the reaction against Victorian values in middlebrow women's literature between the wars). Gluing the head back on the injured figurine is evidently an effort to disguise her frustration with domestic labour from her mother. There are a number of occasions when Mrs Wray's demands are challenging to Frances, such as when Frances finds her trying to make tea alone, 'with the faintly harried air she always had when left alone in the kitchen' (Waters 2014: 11). Evidently there is no alternative to Frances doing the domestic labour herself—her mother is simply not capable. Mrs Wray clearly experiences profound class discomfort with Frances doing this in the first place; she asks to get a servant when they clearly cannot afford one, and Frances feels obliged to ensure that her mother is 'safely out of the way' before she does major housework jobs (Waters 2014: 49, 23). So it is still not entirely true to follow Humble's paradigm and say that this is a source of ongoing anxiety for Frances; it is more a daily challenge. Here, again, we see something of the subtle mediations of history—and the historical literary middlebrow—that make up Waters's novels. Rather than being a straightforward pastiche of a 1920s middlebrow character, processing her 'new' responsibility, Frances is more challengingly contemporary than that, highlighting the cross-temporal connection between the present day and the past.

Domestic labour has remained a source of contention in late-twentieth and twenty-first-century culture in the UK; in *The Paying Guests*, the contemporary version of the anxiety that Humble describes is not a crisis of 'new' responsibility, but an exhaustion with perpetual responsibility for domestic labour. The Marxist-feminist Wages for Housework (Sisterhood 2013) campaigns in the 1960s proposed that the undervaluing of domestic labour would shift if it became paid work. While not explicitly referring to domestic labour, in the cleaning and maintaining of a house sense, the Fawcett Society's (2013) recent analysis of the impact of unpaid care work on women's lives and earning potential speaks to the burden of unpaid labour in general on women in the latter half of the twentieth century (see also Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* [1963], for example), and in the present day. In this way, there is something subtly anachronistic in Frances's responses to her work—her awareness of the ongoing drudgery and burden of it—as she is an analogy for a present-day crisis as well as a historical one. Again, we see how, in balancing the historical literary middlebrow with its present-day correlate, Waters creates the neo-historical middlebrow, a fiction of past and present simultaneously, and one that

formulates a new kind of (non-linear) heritage for the middlebrow readers of the present day, seeing their cipher in Frances's frustration. This, then, is a uniquely *neo*-historical mediation of the history of middle-class women's relationships to domestic labour. The middlebrow becomes the liminally appropriate location for this feminised and domestic experience.

However, as I have suggested in the example of the hall floor above, even beyond this slight anachronism, domestic labour plays another role in this novel: creating a community between Frances and Lilian. As they become closer friends:

After that, they met more or less daily, partly to compare their thoughts on *Anna Karenina*—which Frances had begun to re-read—but mainly, simply, for the pleasure of each other's company. Whenever they could, they shared their housework, or made their chores overlap. One Monday morning they washed blankets together in a zinc tub on the lawn, Frances feeding them through the mangle while Lilian turned the wheel; afterwards [...] they sat on the step drinking tea and smoking cigarettes like chars. (Waters 2014: 105-106)

There are many ways in which this quotation supports an interpretation of *The Paying Guests* as middlebrow, not least in its gesture towards the middlebrow book clubs/reading groups that I mentioned previously. In sharing their domestic labour, 'making their chores overlap', but also in helping each other with the work itself, Frances and Lilian create a shared women's space within their shared home. When they sit on the step 'like chars' they allow this domestic space to erase class differences between them (again, hardly 'hypersensitive to the minutiae'), not just because of their labour, but also because of their relaxation after their labour. There remains a subversion of the class expectations of the 1920s middlebrow, and this particular manifestation of it in the novel demonstrates Frances's sense of herself as almost classless—the 'well-bred woman doing the work of a char' has become 'like' a char. Again, rather than straightforward pastiche, Waters's literary middlebrow is a site of class contention and transition. Within this, however, Frances continues to inhabit the liminal middlebrow space of the neo-historical aesthetic, offering a cross-period engagement that simultaneously and contradictorily takes in the 1920s and the present day, the moments of setting and of writing.

I have identified Waters as writing the history of specifically white and middle-class lesbianism, most prominently in *The Paying Guests* and *The Night Watch* (although arguably in her earlier novels as well). Frances and Lilian's forming relationship also develops through being and becoming middle-class. Frances, the character from a wealthy,

educated background who has been a politicised ‘bluestocking’, is also, of the two women, the one who has had a relationship with a woman in the past, and who identifies more explicitly as a lesbian. When Lilian asks, “There wasn’t a man?” bewildered at her first learning about a relationship between women, Frances replies:

No, there wasn’t a man. There never has been a man, for me. It seems I haven’t the—man microbe, or whatever it is one needs. My poor mother’s convinced that there must be one in me somewhere. She’s done everything to shake it loose save turn me upside down by my heels. (Waters 2016: 166)

This idea of the ‘man microbe’ that Frances feels herself to be lacking demonstrates how she identifies herself as being a woman who only desires women—who has the ‘woman microbe’, as it were. The narrative does not give us access to Lilian’s internal monologue, so we do not know anything about her self-identification, but it is evident that she had never encountered women’s same-sex desire before, and she is shocked by Frances’s initial revelation: she is ‘so patently struggling to digest what she had just learned that the information was almost visible’ and subsequently she ‘never once caught Frances’s eye as she was [giving her a haircut], and she never lost her flaming colour’ (Waters 2016: 120). With this distinction between the two women, and through the development of their relationship, there is a subtle implication that Frances’s much more established upper-middle-class status is enabling for her lesbian identity, and Lilian’s movement into the middle ‘clerk’ class—with the analogy for this movement in her and Leonard renting rooms from Frances—is what allows her to experience same-sex desire.

Waters’s novels have a complex relationship to class, and it is manifested differently in her different texts (and shifts and changes within individual narratives), despite the fact that the novels themselves are all participants in the middlebrow. So a judgement about *The Paying Guests* cannot necessarily be extended to refer to Waters’s overarching project. That said, in this novel—the one that is most straightforwardly associated with the middlebrow—she implies that imagined histories of lesbianism reside most comfortably in that middle-class middlebrow. In one sense, this is to be expected: as I have discussed, the neo-historical aesthetic is uniquely suited to the middlebrow, with its need to be readably accessible but simultaneously challenging to established ideas of what history *is*: i.e. in having both a post-postmodern investment in postmodernism and in straightforward narrative. In imagining lesbian histories, Waters importantly locates them in this troubled and liminal middlebrow space, because it offers a commitment to necessarily readable and accessible narrative, even as it opens up clearly acknowledged

postmodern gaps in that historical narrative and its access to 'truth'. In associating Frances with a present-day relationship to housework and domesticity, Waters reminds us of the impossibility of the histories she imagines in fiction, working to emphasise that they are not 'real' histories, because the constraints of heteropatriarchal historiography have persistently led to the exclusion of these feminised, domestic, lesbian, and middlebrow narratives from our canonical understandings of the past. Instead, she shows us that these fictionalised imaginings of what those histories might have been can only be accessed through these very explicitly crafted, literary narratives. She uses the gaps that postmodernism has opened up in our understanding of what historical narrative *is*, and its relationship to 'truth' to suggest that fictional narratives can and should have some legitimacy in narrating imagined versions of the past. She performs all of these challengingly postmodern actions, however, in straightforward, middlebrow narrative, full of the pleasures of narrative fulfilment. This is why the neo-historical aesthetic is fundamentally middlebrow, relying on the simultaneity of these two contradictory elements.

However, beyond the necessity of the middlebrow for inventing neo-histories, the implication in these fictional histories of lesbianism—that they are white, middle-class, and middlebrow—is a more controversial and surprising one. Frances and Lilian find their way through the various challenges that face them, with the ending of the novel uncertainly implying that they will be together. However, their prospective togetherness is also unavoidably middlebrow. They must either remain with Frances's mother in Camberwell or, if their plans come to fruition, they will leave Frances's mother (and thus her burden of care responsibilities) to start a new, bluestocking life in the manner of Frances's friend Christina and her partner Stevie, working, going to art school, perhaps living in Bloomsbury. This is not to say that the middle class or the middlebrow are inevitably negative cultural locations, so much as to draw attention to the deeply troubling implication in this novel, through Lilian's simultaneous transition *into* the middle class and *into* her lesbian identity, that they are the *only* location for an imagining of lesbian experience in this period. (Again, Waters's other novels might be read as a counterpoint to this.) While Waters is radically imagining pasts for her lesbian characters, she is also *constraining* them to a middlebrow, and in many ways a profoundly normative, existence. The middlebrow has the often-ignored political potential to offer an importantly feminised literary space, in which in the particular context of the neo-historical aesthetic, women's and lesbian histories can gain legitimacy. However, that space can often be held

back by this conservatism, as manifested in Waters's 'happy endings' and in a broadly racially exclusionary politics. By focusing on the middlebrow's interest in and commitment to the middle class, Waters's lesbian neo-histories are pulled into this troubling dichotomy.

***The Paying Guests* and the middlebrow intimate public**

Returning to Frances and Lilian's shared experiences of reading, we see another key aspect of the middlebrow: reading groups are one of Beth Driscoll's essential middlebrow institutions. In the final part of my analysis of Waters's middlebrow neo-historical aesthetic, I wish to maintain this focus on the ways in which we might read the middlebrow in *The Paying Guests* as a constraining influence on its neo-historical project. I will, in particular, consider Frances and Lilian's shared experiences as part of the development of a middlebrow 'intimate public', and I will consider how that also influences readers' engagement with the neo-historical aesthetic.

To interpret this reading community, we need to think first about how and why these communities are developed. Another of Driscoll's key definitions of the middlebrow is that it is 'emotional', by which she means: it represents emotional experiences for its characters; it produces emotional responses in its readers; and is known to be written by publically emotional authors (e.g. Johnson et al). *The Paying Guests* is very much about emotion, with the development of a passionate relationship between the two women articulated through the minutiae of Frances's emotions in response to Lilian, from a 'smudge of guilt', to feeling 'exposed and foolish', to 'transfixed, bewildered', to her heart feeling 'too full for its socket' and more. The crisis of the second half of the novel represents, as much as anything else, the boredom of experiencing emotional extremes, especially constant fear (Waters 2014: 81, 85, 171, 225). Evidently, then, *The Paying Guests* is emotional and middlebrow in this aspect of its content. Janice Radway (1997: 259) writes of the early twentieth century that middlebrow acts of reading became events 'for identification, connection, and response'. On one hand, this is relevant to the reader of *The Paying Guests*, whose identification with the characters in the text revolves, among other things, around differing versions of the frustration with domestic labour described above, and through sympathy with the emotional experiences of the characters. But these moments of middlebrow empathetic identification are also inextricably connected to the functioning of the neo-historical aesthetic in this novel, because the moments in which

we can identify women of the present day in a historically-set narrative, are moments of both anachronism and non-linear heritage-building.

Following a similar methodology to my own in exploring reader responses through the text itself, Timothy Aubry (2011: 1) writes, like Radway did about the early twentieth century, that readers of contemporary middlebrow fiction:

[...] want to encounter characters who remind them of themselves, their family members, or their friends. In search of comfort and companionship, they also expect novels to validate their grievances, insecurities, and anxieties, while confirming their sense of themselves as deep, complicated, emotionally responsive human beings.

His overall thesis is that readers in the twenty-first-century United States are reading for the purposes of emotional identification—‘for therapy’, as he calls it—rather than intellectual engagement. Evidently, this is a response, of sorts, to criticisms of readers for their resistance to ‘difficult’ fiction, such as in Will Self’s argument above. However, when this emotional congruence is manifested in *historical* fiction, it becomes quite a different concept: to be identifiable to readers, characters must inevitably be anachronistic. This has important links to the anachronisms I have highlighted at the heart of the neo-historical aesthetic, wherein the ‘knowingness’ of the anachronisms creates shared collusion, offering mutually enjoyable nudges in the texts—I will discuss this knowingness further in my next chapter.

In the case of Waters’s novels, the potential for reader identification with characters is challengingly neo-historical. As I implied above, *The Paying Guests* (2014: 123) tracks Frances’s shifts in mood, without acknowledging their rapid and contradictory changes. Frances is ‘on the brink of tears’ in response to her mother’s comment that she looks ‘slipshod as you go about the house [...] I don’t mind for myself, I’m simply thinking about callers’. This conversation takes place immediately after Frances’s awkward coming out as a lesbian to Lilian (or rather, coming out as having had a relationship with a woman—the more explicitly lesbian ‘microbe’ aspect comes later). Mrs Wray’s use of the word ‘slipshod’ is a reminder of the historical setting, an unusual word in a present-day context, especially to describe a person’s appearance, and it firmly places the narrative, and Frances’s mother, in a historical setting. In response to her mother’s comment, Frances ‘crossed to the hearth and stood at the mantel-glass, pretending to pat and tweak the new haircut. Idiot! Idiot! she said to herself, pushing the feelings down again’ (Waters 2014: 123). Frances’s castigation of herself for her heightened emotional state is

sympathetic, and it has the potential to be a moment of empathy, not just in her distress at having her appearance insulted by her mother, but also in her anger at herself for being so distressed by an apparently throwaway comment. This is just one of many spaces in the novel wherein the description of a character might confirm readers' 'sense of themselves as deep, complicated, emotionally responsive human beings'. (Although this is not, by any means, to suggest that Frances is universally, or even consistently, sympathetic in this novel. She is certainly not.) Crucial within this moment of connection is the fact that pursuing empathetic emotional identification with characters set in the past demands that they be anachronisms of a sort. Aubry does not discuss historical fiction, but it is evident that for a reader to 'encounter characters who remind them of themselves', those characters must be anachronistic—characters more like the present than the past—and thus, in this context, *neo*-historical.

This readerly experience of seeking emotional connections to texts is also metafictionally mirrored and dramatised by the emotional responses that Frances and Lilian describe when they discuss *Anna Karenina* (1877). Lilian speaks first in this exchange:

‘I could hardly bear to read it. And poor Vronsky—Is that how you say it?’

‘I believe so. Yes, poor Vronsky. Poor Anna. Poor everyone! Even poor old dull Karenin.’ (Waters 2014: 104)

The repetition of ‘poor’, ‘poor’, ‘poor’ represents the emotional connection that Frances and Lilian have to the characters; their sympathy—Frances’s in particular—is presented as indiscriminating in its emotional responsiveness: ‘Poor everyone!’ (It’s also worth noting Lilian’s deferral to Frances in how to pronounce of Vronsky’s name, which assumes Frances’s superior knowledge and cultural capital; this might derive from Lilian’s view of Frances’s superior class status to her own.) While it is not necessarily evident that Frances and Lilian ‘identify’ with the characters in *Anna Karenina* in the way that Aubry suggests (and thus they do not create anachronisms of those characters), they clearly have strong emotional and middlebrow responses to their reading experience. This has gendered implications, with women’s relationship to reading often having historically been treated as ‘subversive, disruptive, or threatening’ to male-dominated and exclusionary literacy practices. At various points in the past, women have been denied literacy, or women’s reading practices have been circumscribed to those texts deemed ‘appropriate’ (for more on this see: Jack 2012: 4). This further emphasises the significance of women’s reading communities. Frances and Lilian go on to share reading beyond just *Anna Karenina*: ‘soon [...] they were shelling the peas together, discussing novels, poems,

plays, the authors they did and didn't admire...' and, as quoted above, they begin to meet daily to discuss *Anna Karenina*, as they read it simultaneously (Waters 2014: 104). This middlebrow shared reading influences the middlebrow locus of Waters's imagined historical lesbianism: in sharing their reading of this novel, the two women become more intimate. After this initial moment of connection over *Anna Karenina*, they develop their intimacy into a lesbian relationship. This novel that produces Frances and Lilian's shared reading intimacy contains exclusively heterosexual relationships, which is informative when we consider Frances and Lilian's apparent emotional experience of the text—the sympathy they feel for the characters, despite the fact that all of those characters express broadly heterosexual desires. There were few mainstream narratives exploring non-normative sexualities available at the time, and, certainly in the mainstream literary field, for some years subsequently. Waters herself, writing middlebrow lesbian novels, makes an important intervention in this historical and literary trajectory. With that in mind, *Anna Karenina* makes a surprising cultural foundation for the characters' lesbian relationship, but it does logically cohere with the middlebrow normative sphere of shared reading, the same middlebrow to which Frances and Lilian's relationship appears to be restricted. The neo-historical middlebrow places restrictions upon these lesbian characters, even as it disturbs the expectations of linear history in imagining the pasts that they inhabit.

Lauren Berlant (2008: viii) identifies the 'intimate public', an intimacy that is developed between a public of 'strangers who consume common texts and things'. Driscoll is astute in reading the intimate public into her conception of the new literary middlebrow, in that emotional, middle-class, women readers share the intimate public of consuming middlebrow fiction. Driscoll's focus is specifically on the intimate public of the audiences of public reading groups, such as Oprah's Book Club, and the emotional communities that they create. She discusses Winfrey's anxieties during a Book Club, about not 'getting', not understanding, Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (2004), and the audience 'dissatisfaction' with this feeling of being unable to understand the book (Driscoll 2014: 62). This connects very clearly to my discussion above of the middlebrow resistance to 'difficulty', and the accessible construction of Waters's literariness—gently challenging but not difficult.

Frances and Lilian's reading creates another layer to this intimate public. The reader can identify—whether explicitly or not—a shared experience with the characters in the pleasure of reading, or rather in the consumption of texts, and in emotional responses to those texts. These characters are not 'strangers' to the reader (as in the intimate public of 'strangers who consume common texts and things'), because we develop a relationship



with them through the process of reading the narrative. However, this intimacy only travels in one direction, with the characters having no intimacy with the reader even though the reader might feel intimacy with them (an interesting analogy for the past not being able to know the future, as the present attempts to know the past—both are crises of linearity). There is therefore still an element of ‘strangers’ within the intimacy.

Berlant (2008: 104; original emphasis) writes: ‘What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience’. The neo-historical aesthetic and *The Paying Guests* suggest a modification of that. By ‘historical experience’, Berlant means personal and lived experience, including wider historical contexts, and specifically those that have been lived through by the ‘consumers’ that she is describing. By imagining this domestic narrative of the past with the neo-historical aesthetic and through Frances and Lilian—two middle-class women—and by exploring their relationship through and to the class divide, *The Paying Guests* invents a ‘broadly common historical experience’ that has not been lived by the reader-consumer, but can be ‘experienced’ by them through the text. This *imagines* a shared history for the intimate public of the reader-consumers, a history for middle-class British women (and lesbians in particular). However, it also creates a common, fictional history between reader-consumer and character, a non-linear bridging of a historical gap to connect ‘worldview and emotional knowledge’. This relies on certain similarities between reader-consumer and character—such as in their emotional responsiveness, both to events and to reading, or in their experiences of domesticity. The commonalities of some shared experiences between Frances and Lilian and the reader-consumer allow the imagined historical contexts of the novel to also become shared—a ‘broadly common historical experience’.

This, then, is another way in which this very subtle kind of neo-historical anachronism relies on the middlebrow, on this communion between characters and reader-consumers. Through this sense of emotional communities that exist between reader-consumers, and also between the reader-consumer and the text, we see how Waters’s complex middlebrowness, and the intimate public that *The Paying Guests* creates, are also central to the neo-historical work that the novel is doing. Waters—and, by extension, the neo-historical aesthetic—uses the middlebrow to imagine a new kind of (in her case female- and lesbian-orientated) neo-history that does not require difficult intellectual distance, although it can be intellectually challenging, with limitations. She uses middlebrow

narrative structures (chronological here, although not in *The Night Watch*) to dramatise the troubling status of narrative in the present day, full of incursions from the twenty-first century, but coherently easy to read nonetheless. The neo-historical aesthetic uses the middlebrow animating emotional connection of fiction to create new, imagined histories that are not necessarily factually accurate, but that access an imagined non-linear heritage through the intimate public of shared experiences with the fictional past.

### **Conclusion: The neo-historical middlebrow**

Throughout this chapter, I have been forced to neglect certain, very relevant aspects of the middlebrow in relation to Sarah Waters's novels. A glaring absence is my necessary lack of engagement with the specifically commodified nature of the middlebrow: its position at a critical nexus of market forces, its fetishisation of commodities, and the responses that Waters's novels make to this. This is conspicuous in the context of the previous chapter, and my consideration of post-postmodernism as partly the inevitable product of persistently ongoing neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century. The positioning of readers as consumers, and the interest in commodified objects in these novels, are meaningful aspects of their middlebrowness that warrant further analysis. As Lilian says to Frances when looking at her meagre selection of dresses in bafflement: 'Have you never wanted nice things?' (Waters 2014: 112) Indeed, the commodification of specific items becomes part of the women's intimate public in *The Paying Guests*, although with a complex layer that revolves around the pleasure of giving—as when Frances, despite not being able to afford it, buys Lilian a china caravan, which becomes a simultaneously public and private emblem of their intimacy: 'I shall look at this when we're apart', says Lilian, 'and it won't matter who I'm with, whether it's Len or anyone. He'll think I'm here, but I won't be here. I'll be with you, Frances' (Waters 2014: 242). Commodification plays an important role in the themes of the middlebrow within the novels, in addition to, as I mentioned above, their 'packaging' as Driscoll (2015: 25) calls it—the novels' covers—being part of their middlebrow, commodified distribution. Following this, an account of Waters's works and the intimate public could productively trace the significance of her *Stylist* launch in the context of Driscoll's account of Oprah's Book Club and its mediated nature.

However, the focus of this chapter has not just been on the ways in which Waters's novels participate in the middlebrow, although demonstrating the ways in which they do—and in much bolder and more comprehensive ways than have previously been

critically acknowledged—has formed a substantial part of my argument. Waters is locating a fictionalised historical space in which she *creates* and *imagines* unknown lesbian histories. My analysis of her middlebrowness also draws attention to the limitations of that middlebrow space, and the restrictions that it imposes. In writing middlebrow fictions, Waters is importantly and powerfully making these gendered, lesbian neo-histories available and accessible to a broad audience, and she writes fun and persuasively entertaining narratives in the process. However, critical analyses of her work—often in their passionate enthusiasm,<sup>4</sup> a middlebrow reader response—have generally failed to appreciate the broadly normativising (to white, middle-class, dyadic relationship norms) impulse that is also present in her work. Waters creates a powerful critique of class both in the present day and in the past. Indeed, it would be easy to argue that her novels do this persistently and reliably in their analyses of the borders of class change and class experience. However, their ultimate conclusions, as we have seen in this chapter, and as is borne out by her other texts, generally suggest a progress narrative towards a middle-class existence—and this is a narrative that can be comfortably consumed by the middle class.

Nancy and Flo, in *Tipping the Velvet*, end the novel secure in their left-wing, lower-middle-class family household; *Fingersmith*'s Sue and Maud begin new lives as women of independent means (though non-normatively in writing pornography);<sup>5</sup> and in *The Paying Guests*, Frances and Lilian end the novel miraculously free of Leonard and potentially able to begin the Bloomsbury lifestyle that they had so coveted. *Affinity* is a more troubling case: we might see the ending as suggesting that Margaret's middle-class status imposes greater restrictions on her sexuality than working-class Selina's or Ruth's experiences. In *The Night Watch*, the dyadic, middle-class, cohabiting ideal is revealed to be full of deep rifts when Helen and Julia's 'happy ending' in the first section suffers because of the social restrictions that inhibit them from being open about their relationship. The anxiety about this need for secrecy means they find life together difficult, and Helen is overcome by violent jealousies, inextricably linked to her inability to express her commitment to Julia publicly. Even with these more complex cases, the novels commit to romantic storylines, which at various different stages (especially wide-ranging in *The Night Watch*) conform to certain conservative, gendered expectations of 'women's literature', despite the fact that those romance plots are radically lesbian and middlebrow (as Alison Light [1991: 163] puts it: 'romance writers were usually content to "entertain"'). Throughout all of these novels, there is a valorising of normative (white, dyadically coupled) middle-class lifestyles

as the primary mode for the development of an imagined lesbian history. Waters is a skilful storyteller, and the accessibility of her middlebrow narratives is partly what gives them their bestseller power and potential as neo-historical texts for imagining new histories and new ways of *doing* history. However, these more troubling implications of her middlebrow accessibility also require acknowledgement.

Beyond this analysis specifically of Waters, though, this chapter has examined the ways in which the middlebrow becomes the necessary medium for the neo-historical aesthetic—with all of the potentially negative implications that this entails. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the neo-historical aesthetic, by working to imagine new, explicitly fictional narratives about the past, relies, among other things, on anachronistic emotional identifications between reader and character. Such emotional connectivity is also part of the middlebrow. The neo-historical aesthetic also requires a degree of intellectual engagement with its texts for its participation in postmodern deconstructions of narrative to be apparent. In the case of Waters, this relies on a recognition of the literary tropes that she uses to draw attention to the fictionality and constructed nature of her narratives—which work to remind us that these are historical *fictions* and not histories. Not all use of literary tropes is necessarily self-referential or metafictional, but in the context of the neo-historical aesthetic, it has the potential to be so, drawing attention to the mode of *fictional* narrative over factual. It is also necessary for these tropes to be accessible and comprehensible to the reader, which is a fundamentally middlebrow trait: the novels are intellectually engaging, without resulting in readers' failure to understand them. Most of all, however, this analysis of two of Waters's novels reveals that the middlebrow is inherently the location of the neo-historical aesthetic, because of its reliance on narrative even in the context of destabilised narrative dependence. Although *The Paying Guests*, for example, offers a subtly anachronistic image of domestic labour in Frances's drudgery, making a non-chronological link between the present day and the explicitly fictionalised past, it does so in ways that do not disrupt the novel's easy-to-read and coherent narrative. The middlebrow is thus where we see this aspect of post-postmodern relationships to narrative most clearly, in a simultaneous recognition and rejection of narrative as a means to access (fictional) 'truth'. As an analysis of Waters's novels makes very clear, then, the neo-historical aesthetic *is* middlebrow.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Again, *The Little Stranger* troubles this statement, as it does not have any explicit lesbian characters, nor any women who openly or even implicitly desire women; this means that critical work done on this novel is generally less queer-focused. That said, there has been interesting work done on the country house, Hundreds Hall itself, as the primary queer presence in the novel (such as Parker 2013).
- <sup>2</sup> For example, the following characters are all associated with ghosts and haunting: Nancy in *Tipping the Velvet*, Margaret in *Affinity*, Caroline in *The Little Stranger* (although this is more complex, as there is nothing to suggest she is a lesbian, more that she is haunted by aggressive male privilege), and Frances in *The Paying Guests*. Kaye Mitchell (2013b: 85), among others, discusses this.
- <sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this is a feature of the novel that was altered by the BBC adaptation (Laxton 2014). Here, although the reverse structure was broadly followed, the final scenes returned to the ‘present’—to 1947—showing chronological ends to the storylines, with Helen leaving Julia, for example, an event that does not take place in the book.
- <sup>4</sup> This enthusiasm is apparent, for example, in Kaye Mitchell (2013a: 3): ‘it is a mark of her talent that her novels consistently engage with this thorniest of issues while remaining utterly compelling and intricately plotted, never laboured or didactic’. She also quotes other glowing reviews, such as Justine Jordan: ‘Her ability to bring the times to life is stunning’; Philip Hensher: ‘a truthful, lovely book’; and Tracy Chevalier: ‘Waters’s persistent picking apart of class is fascinating’ (Mitchell 2013a: 3).
- <sup>5</sup> Critical analyses of the end of *Fingersmith* have expressed anxiety about the potentially oppressive form that this writing might take. See, for example, Muller (2009-2010: 126).

### **Chapter three**

#### **‘We must all learn to live together, the living and the dead’: Neo-historical hauntings of history and language**

CONCLUSION: This is a time for ghosts.

Florence Cathcart, ‘Seeing Through Ghosts’, p.7

*The Awakening* (Murphy 2011: 00:01)

Having established the neo-historical aesthetic at the centre of post-postmodern discourses on narrative and history and, in turn, situated those discourses at the heart of the middlebrow, this chapter will go on to discuss several other middlebrow, post-postmodern texts. In particular, it will articulate how concepts of ghosts and haunting offer a helpfully revealing and productive metaphor for the work of the neo-historical aesthetic. Haunting, the apparition of spectral beings from a different time, destabilises the coherence of linear narrative, insisting on the coexistence of a ‘present’ with a non-congruent temporal moment. As such, in the texts discussed in this chapter and in their neo-historical actions, haunting problematises a straightforward relationship to narrative history, disrupting otherwise coherent narratives about the past with anachronistic incursions from both past and future. The films *The Others* (2001) directed by Alejandro Amenábar and *The Awakening* (2011) directed by Nick Murphy, and the novel *Dark Matter* by Michelle Paver (2010), are all set in the past, but contain disruptive ghosts that suggest that our understandings of those past settings are perpetually influenced by our presents. These narratives remind us that *we* are perpetually influenced and haunted by our pasts and futures, in all their incoherent inaccessibility, and that attempting to access the past through narrative is a flawed endeavour requiring careful critical engagement. Dramatising the limitations on our narratives of the past and the ongoing contradictory efforts to manage those pasts through narrative, these ghost stories formulate haunting as a neo-historical tool and effect in contradictory, post-postmodern attempts to narrate the past. Haunting shows us that accessing the past is impossible, but that, in spite of this, disruptions to linearity in fictional narratives offer potential interactions between past, present, and future.

The logic of haunting for a neo-historical engagement with the past goes even further than this. In previous chapters, I established that the neo-historical post-postmodern condition relied upon the conflicted but simultaneous coexistence of postmodern theories

of the inaccessibility of history through narrative, alongside the pre-postmodern commitment to narrative itself. I have discussed in detail the problems that this produces for these anachronistic neo-historical texts. This is the definition of postmodernism that I will continue to mobilise in this chapter. Here, haunting and spectrality work alongside and within the challenges of narrating the past after postmodern deconstructions of narrative. In its bringing together of different temporal moments, the logic of haunted spectrality actually suggests that this coexistence of the postmodern and the pre-postmodern (i.e. the post-postmodern) is entirely possible. It is not without conflict—in all of my haunted texts, the presence of ghosts creates numerous problems—but it is *possible*. This chapter will therefore argue that in its neo-historical form, the post-postmodern is a haunted state, pulling together different intellectual periods and their differing relationships to history and narrative. This is not a straightforward dialectic of postmodern/pre-postmodern either, although in contrasting the two relationships to narrative, it can often seem as such. Haunting again offers a way to portray the complexity of the relationships at stake. As the opening text to *The Awakening* puts it: ‘Conclusion: it is a time for ghosts’. In the twenty-first century, with these challenging relationships to history and narrative at the core of middlebrow culture, this quotation is particularly apt. This is, indeed, a time for ghosts, as they illuminate the current period’s out-of-time-ness as it attempts to unite sometimes contradictory temporal positions in a conflicted single narrative.

However, with that in mind, neo-historical ghost stories are not quite the same as some of the other texts I have discussed. My discussion of haunted language and proleptic ironies in this chapter will continue my work in previous chapters on articulating the differences between certain manifestations of the neo-historical aesthetic and historiographic metafiction. However, *The Others*, *Dark Matter*, and *The Awakening* are also part of a general trajectory of ghost stories set in the past. Their participation in the neo-historical aesthetic is to a different degree to texts such as Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), discussed here, and *The Underground Railroad* (2016) or *Life Mask* (2001). These ghost stories do not contain explicit anachronisms that identify a fraught relationship to the narration of past and present. Rather, the effects of haunting in the texts participate in neo-historical discourse and demonstrate a challenging relationship to linear narrative. In some ways, this non-linearity is integral to any ghost story, but in these texts, the specific ways in which this haunting is manifested acknowledge and process a troubling relationship to history and narrative in the contemporary moment.

This chapter will therefore begin with a definition of ghosts and haunting that recognises the challenges and complexities of effectively naming the unnameable, of articulating the inchoate presence of the spectre and how it functions. I use Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993), and analyse *Dark Matter*, with Derridean spectrality in mind. Through this, I will emphasise how the achronological and returning nature of the ghost (whether from the past or the future)—what Peter Boxall (2013: 64) calls the 'spectral form of historical persistence'—is so well-suited to the functioning of the neo-historical aesthetic. The next section of the chapter will further consider haunting's relationship to linear histories, with reference to *The Others*. It will suggest the ways in which *The Others* both participates in a spectral deconstruction of linear narrative and temporality *and* expresses a devoted investment in them both, with characters irresistibly drawn to a logic of historical linearity despite their own disjunction from it. This becomes a productive analogy for the post-postmodern relationship to history, both aware, after postmodernism, of the impossibility of historical narrative, and drawn to it nonetheless. The next section will go on explore what I call 'haunted narrative', interacting with Derridean theories of spectrality, analysing how characters in *The Others* manifest challenging relationships to narrative texts and to interpretation as a spectral process. In particular, I identify Anne in *The Others* as a post-postmodernist, troubling the statuses of various texts and resisting traditional history in her relationship to those texts and as a spectre herself. This relationship that Anne articulates to plausibility connects to the next section of the chapter, which engages with and problematises the plausibility of the neo-historical aesthetic itself in *The Awakening*. Deploying haunting as a critical and methodological tool, this study of *The Awakening* explores its tense manipulations of viewers' belief in its hauntings. The section ultimately argues that the ontological uncertainty of neo-historical hauntings emphasises the capacity of the fictionality of the neo-historical aesthetic, creating a textual space in which the real and the not-real coexist.

Within these interpretations of haunting, it remains important to situate the neo-historical aesthetic within its literary context, and thus the next section addresses both neo-Victorianism and Gothic literature, as two literary modes or genres that are connected to the neo-historical aesthetic. Specifically, they are here analysed in the context of haunting, with an alertness to the different ways in which neo-Victorian, neo-historical, and Gothic texts can be haunted by presents, pasts, and futures, whether they are the otherwise occluded histories of women, or the returns that are part of fictionalising the past in the present day. Returning to *The Awakening* at the end of this section suggests



how it, along with neo-Victorianism and the Gothic, emphasises the limitations of historical narrative, in this case with anachronistic gestures towards characters' futures. Such gestures are analysed in the next section, which demonstrates, via Derridean theories of representation, that this suggestively anachronistic language and knowledge is actually a way in which the present day proleptically haunts these historically-set texts. This is explored through an analysis of Sarah Waters's use of the word 'queer'. The subject of the next section is the *knowingness* of the neo-historical aesthetic, and the collusive engagement it requires between author and reader to recognise and interpret the anachronistic presences in the text. This is another way in which we, as readers, are spectrally present, through proleptically ironic references to the futures that we know the characters will have. A return to *Wolf Hall* highlights this, especially when contrasted to a historiographic metafictional text like *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1995).

The concluding section of the chapter expands these ideas of anachronistic hauntings outward, to suggest the queer *potential* of the neo-historical aesthetic; this is not, necessarily, to suggest that it is currently a queer form. The conclusion gestures, with support from the works on queer temporalities by Elizabeth Freeman and Valerie Rohy, towards the neo-historical aesthetic's anachronic and haunted structure, and thus suggests that perhaps it has a *structurally* queer potential. This chapter examines a range of different neo-historical ghosts, arguing that the neo-historical aesthetic is inevitably and structurally haunted, by the past, present, and future, and that haunting is at the heart of its post-postmodern relationship to history and to narrative. Haunting is, perhaps, at the heart of the post-postmodern condition itself.

### **Defining haunting and ghosts**

In the critical history of ghosts, a straightforward definition of them is elusive: a substantial part of their attraction is their indefinability, the fact that they resist strictly bounded definitions and emerge in different contexts in different ways. Jacques Derrida (2006: 5; original emphasis) argues in his definition of 'hauntology', that the spectre '*is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence'. We are uncertain about their existence; spectres transgress the boundaries of knowledge and definition and this is why they are hard to define. Derrida's repetition of 'precisely' emphasises the imprecision of such uncertainties, and, to a certain extent, implies the anxiety that can be produced by that imprecision. However, to at least try to put it simply: in this chapter, 'ghosts',

‘apparitions’, and ‘spectres’ will serve as broadly interchangeable terms for the things that haunt, by coming from a different time into a textual present, whether as living dead pasts or anticipated futures. ‘Haunting’ and ‘spectrality’ will be used to describe the processes by which these out-of-time figures are made textually present. However, for haunting to be a functional trope and metaphor in this chapter, it is necessary to also articulate some of those structural elements that allow ghosts to conjoin time periods, as in the haunted neo-historical aesthetic.

In Michelle Paver’s *Dark Matter*, the protagonist, Jack Miller, is left alone for several weeks in the constant darkness of the Arctic Circle in winter, on a 1937 information-gathering expedition to Spitsbergen in north Norway. His journal—which forms the narrative for the most part—tells the story of how he comes to be troubled by what he feels is a hate-filled presence, one that suffuses him with dread. He believes it wants to cause him harm and to force him out of Gruhuken, the isolated location in which he and his companions have located their camp, against the advice of the ship’s crew that brought them there. Jack later learns that another man had previously inhabited Gruhuken, long before Jack and his companions’ arrival (and his companions’ subsequent departure because of ill health); the man had lived there until it was invaded by a mining syndicate whose staff tortured and killed him. Jack does not yet know this history of trauma, however, when he says ‘Gruhuken is haunted’:

But what does it mean, ‘haunted’?

I looked it up in Gus’ dictionary. *To haunt*: 1. *To visit (a person or place) in the form of a ghost*. 2. *To recur (memory, thoughts, etc.), e.g. he was haunted by the fear of insanity*. 3. *To visit frequently* [From ON *heimta*, to bring home, OE *hamettan*, to give a home to.] (Paver 2010: 111; original emphasis)

That etymology, from ‘*heimta*, to bring home’ and ‘*hamettan*, to give a home to’, is significant in both this specific case and more generally as well. (In a sense, it does not matter whether this is the ‘real’ etymology of the word; it is how this neo-historical text chooses to define it.) Jack, as a representative of the living and as an inhabitant of Gruhuken, has *taken* the ghost’s home, not *given* it, disrupting this etymological trajectory and creating a haunted trauma that will finally result in tragedy. These listed origins for the word ‘haunt’ also have connections to the *unheimliche*, the Freudian uncanny, the unhomely sensation of something that is both familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously. However, I will focus on the other definitions of haunting that are more strictly relevant to neo-historical hauntings.

Obviously, 'to visit in the form of a ghost' is not especially revealing without a definition of 'ghost', which Jack studiously fails to provide. The vast majority of his experiences of being haunted revolve around this sense of 'dread' that he experiences and a certainty that he is under threat, with very little direct interaction with the figure of a 'ghost'. However, that haunting also means '*To recur*' and '*To visit frequently*' is significant. Derrida (2006: 10; original emphasis) writes of repetition as integral to spectres/ghosts: 'Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*'. The complexity of temporality here is telling: Derrida emphasises the imbrication of endings in beginnings—a fact that will become relevant to my discussion of haunting and non-linearity later in this chapter—but also of the cyclical nature of these ghostly 'revenants'. The translator of *Specters* comments on the significance of Derrida's frequent use of this word 'revenant' to describes ghosts and spectres, and elucidates the translation by describing the revenant as 'literally that which comes back' (Peggy Kamuf in Derrida 2006: 224n.1). In *Dark Matter*, when Jack learns about Gruhuken's history from a 'trapper' who comes to visit him briefly, the man describes Gruhuken as haunted by a '*gengångare*—"the one who walks again"' (Paver 2010: 204). In both Derrida and *Dark Matter*, ghosts are, or more accurately *can be*, a repetition of past events, experiences, people, or thoughts.

In Jack's emotionally charged circumstances, the significance of 'he was haunted by the fear of insanity' in his dictionary definition cannot be ignored, as Jack has indeed been haunted by such a fear throughout the text. Haunting in *Dark Matter* is deliberately dubious, with the possibility that there is, in fact, no ghost, but '*rar*' instead:

Men going mad from the dark and the loneliness, murdering each other, shooting themselves. There's even a name for it. They call it *rar*. Armstrong [the British vice consul in Norway] shrugs it off as a 'strangeness' which comes over some people when they winter in the Arctic. He says it's simply a matter of a few odd habits like hoarding matches or obsessively checking stores. But I know from the books that it's worse than that. (Paver 2010: 24)

The psychological element to Jack's haunting, the possibility that he is troubled by hallucinations and disturbances to his mental health—the instability of which he has already documented before he even arrives in Gruhuken—is a common one in ghost stories, and I will discuss later how *The Awakening* leaves us with similar uncertainties about the status of the ghosts we have seen. However, the uncertainty in *Dark Matter* has striking neo-historical effects either way; the fact that Jack mentions this part of the

definition ‘he was haunted by the fear of insanity’ asserts that even if this haunting is *rare*, it is nonetheless still a haunting—a repeated return of fear.

This sense of ‘repetition’ or ‘recurrence’ thus allows us to access the central feature of ghosts that will be relevant in this chapter: that they are out of chronological time. To analyse ghosts and haunting through *Specters of Marx* has become something of a commonplace in discussions of haunting in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century critical and theoretical work on spectrality. *Specters* is a particularly useful text for understanding neo-historical hauntings, because of Derrida’s (2006: xxi) emphasis on Marxist spectrality as a response to a Fukuyaman ‘end of history’ and his repeated assertions that ‘the time is out of joint’. As he writes:

In proposing the title *Specters of Marx*, I was initially thinking of all the forms of a certain haunting obsession that seems to me to organize the *dominant* influence on discourse today. At a time when a new world disorder is attempting to install its neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism, no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx’s ghosts. (Derrida 2006: 45-46; original emphasis)

Links to postmodern theories of history are present here. Derrida insists that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and after the collapse of Soviet communism, the ‘spectre of communism’ identified by Marx, which had haunted Europe throughout the twentieth century, persisted even after Fukuyama’s insistence on the triumph of liberal democracy. Fredric Jameson (1999: 39) responded to this aspect of Derrida’s definition of spectrality by arguing that: ‘Derrida’s ghosts are these moments in which the present—and above all our current present, the wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history, of the new world system of late capitalism—unexpectedly betrays us’. Jameson interprets the ghosts of Derrida’s critique as uncomfortably, glossily postmodern, but the post-postmodern ghosts of the neo-historical aesthetic are structurally different from this. A change from Jameson’s and Derrida’s analysis is, at the very least, evident in the changed relationship to Marxism in the twenty-first century, which has been one of the fluctuating products of contemporary (particularly western, but increasingly globalised) neo-capitalist neoliberalism. That we have moved beyond the ‘new world system of late capitalism’ into some kind of exhausted, dulled, re-entrenchment of the ‘sunny gleaming world’ of Jameson’s critique, and into the post-late capitalism of chapter one, inevitably entails a different relationship to the spectral presence of a Marxist cultural, political, and economic alternative. The contemporary moment thus exists in a much lesser state of anticipation with regard to the return of communism itself—an ironic disturbance to Derrida’s own

anticipated future. However, despite this distinction, *Specters* is still a useful text for interpreting post-postmodern spectrality, particularly as I have defined post-postmodernism in previous chapters. It has been argued that contemporary hauntology is ‘tie[d] in with the popularity of faux-vintage photography’, i.e. with the photographic culture of #liveauthentic (Gallix 2011). As Pamela Thurschwell (2009: 237) writes, this may be a moment in which ‘new kinds of compensatory magic might be needed to heal a world that’s rife with postmodern loss’, and she poses haunting (in certain ghost/‘afterlife’ films of the early twenty-first century) as one such kind of magic.

Derrida also emphasises that this spectre of communism, as identified by Marx—the spectre of communism that haunted Europe in the opening to *The Communist Manifesto*—was a spectre of *anticipation*, a spectre of the communism that Marx anticipated would soon come. This coheres in Derrida’s analysis with the opening to *Hamlet* (1609), through which Derrida (2006: 2; original emphasis) structures the initial part of his analysis in *Specters*:

As in *Hamlet*, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of a specter. More precisely by the *waiting* for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinating: this, the thing (‘this thing’) will end up coming. The *revenant* is going to come.

This is like the functioning of the apparition in *Dark Matter*, with Jack increasingly troubled by his anticipated future. Jack also refers to the ghost as an ‘echo’, ‘An echo from the past’ (Paver 2010: 111), but integral to the concept of an ‘echo’ is not just that it is *from* the past, but that it can and will return. These definitions of haunting thus return, ironically and inevitably, to the fact of spectres’ repetition. This repetitiveness is part of the inevitable anticipation of spectral return; the two features—future focus and repetition—are inextricably linked.

In a general sense, this anticipation, this expectation of the future, highlights another way in which the out-of-time-ness of haunting and spectrality can function, and another way in which it is thus relevant to the neo-historical aesthetic. Tied up in this phrasing ‘The *revenant* is going to come’ is that definition of the revenant as ‘that which comes back’. This means that that-which-comes-back *is going to* come, a complex chronology of past/future/present. Ghosts disrupt linear chronologies, by returning from the past and by containing anticipated future returns within them. As Wendy Brown (2001: 150) puts it, ‘the future is always already populated with certain possibilities derived from the past’, it is ‘constrained, circumscribed, inscribed by the past’, and ‘it is haunted before we make

and enter it'. The future is haunted by our anticipation, just as we are haunted by the anticipated return of spectres from the past. In Brown's formulation, and in Derrida, we see the ways in which past, present, and future come to be uncertainly and challengingly brought together in a structure of haunting. Derrida (2006: 29; original emphasis) writes of the 'non-contemporaneity of present time with itself (this radical untimeliness or this anachrony on the basis of which we are trying here to *think the ghost*)'. Even as the past, present, and future are brought together, we are reminded of the challenges of defining the contemporary moment, of articulating the structure of the time we inhabit, which is always non-contemporaneous with itself. Derrida's haunting offers a logic of the anachronic ghost through which this uncertain present can be interpreted.

The neo-historical aesthetic relies in a number of ways on such a cross-chronological structure; its anachronisms combine different time periods, with present interpretations and meanings anachronistically thrust into historical settings—which this chapter will further explore in the context of haunted language. Plus, the neo-historical aesthetic's own relationship to its postmodern and pre-postmodern pasts relies on an anachronic bringing together of numerous temporal moments. In that anachrony, we see the ghostly return of different pasts. Unlike the Derridean revenant of communism, we have the returns of those histories that have been repressed or marginalised by mainstream historiography—as I discussed in my two previous chapters, with traumatic racial abuses in *The Underground Railroad* and women's and lesbian histories in Sarah Waters's novels. In *Dark Matter*, Jack's relationship to the revenant is inextricably, but uncertainly, tied up with his own emerging homosexuality, and his resentful relationship to his poverty and lower-middle-class family background. The revenant comes to represent much of his unspoken anxieties about both. Jack's confession of love for his (aristocratic, absent) companion, Gus, exceeds his journal, appearing in another, uncertainly narrated form of text, and it appears to precipitate the violent climax of the novel in which a final (uncertain) altercation with the ghost leads to Jack's cabin burning down. However, beyond these troubled neo-historical narrations of marginalised pasts, the haunting in *Dark Matter* is also, as I will discuss below, connected to the anticipated future of 1937 when the novel is set—the future is known by the readers but only suspected by the characters—who uncertainly fear 'another war' (Paver 2010: 8). The physical violence and abject trauma experienced by the ghost spectrally prefigures, in this respect, the violence of the Second World War—and as such the textual future, but also our interpretive present, haunts these texts. These neo-historical hauntings thereby manipulate their anachronic structures to dramatise the

challenges of narrating history after postmodernism. In that sense, it is the challenging and unreliable processes of doing history itself that come to haunt these texts. Spectres of the past haunt the present, and spectres of the present haunt the past in these narratives, with anticipated spectres of the future haunting both.

The ghosts that this chapter will identify and explore do not necessarily identify a sharp break between the post-postmodern condition and the postmodern one, but suggest the imbrication of the latter within the former. I will sometimes interpret Derrida's ghosts—in all of their anachrony—as post-postmodern (although not unequivocally, as my comments on communism above suggest). In *Specters*, he wrote:

There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being ('to be or not to be', in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. (Derrida 2006: 12)

The vast array of critical and theoretical texts now available for the interpretation of ghosts and haunting—all of which rely to varying degrees on Derrida's originary analysis—indicate that (if Derrida was correct in this diagnosis of his contemporary moment) there has been a shift in the flexibility of critics' relationship to spectrality, and to the real/not real.<sup>1</sup> This is a consequence of *Specters of Marx*—and other texts by Derrida—and the way in which it took haunting *seriously* as a field of potentiality and a theoretical methodology. Mark Fisher/k-punk wrote in 2006 that Derrida's hauntology was 'the closest thing we have to a movement, a zeitgeist, at the moment' (k-punk 2006). This is perhaps another difference between our neo-historical spectres and Derrida's own: their incursions into these literary texts, and their linguistic structures, are *knowing*—a word that will figure heavily in the forthcoming analysis—because they participate in a critical field that broadly accepts their existence as a critical approach. A Derridean hauntology has, since its first full articulation in *Specters*, filtered into the fictional texts of the twenty-first century, such that it no longer seems true to suggest, as Peter Buse and Andrew Stott did in 1999 (1; original emphasis), that 'spectres, apparitions, phantoms and *revenants* have been eclipsed in the popular imagination'. They are part of much contemporary fiction, though not always explicitly, sometimes in more subtle, trace, interpretive ways.

Bearing in mind this sense that there might be some development within post-postmodernism from postmodern contexts, it would be an oversimplification of the complexity of haunting—and of the neo-historical aesthetic—to imply that this is a

straightforward and linear dialectic of past/present, or past/future. Julian Wolfreys (2002: x; original emphasis) writes that spectrality exists:

[...] in a gap between the limits of two ontological categories. [...] emerging between, and yet not as part of, two negations: *neither, nor*. A third term, the spectral, speaks of the limits of determination, while arriving beyond the terminal both in and of identification in either case (alive/dead) and not as an oppositional or dialectical term itself defined as part of some logical economy.

Wolfreys's work is not without its problems; he structures interpretation in general as an entirely spectral process, 'to the point where everything becomes ghostly', according to María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013b: 34). However, the ontological structure of haunting that he poses is useful: haunting is non-dialectical. Its very point is that it resides in the spaces between ontological categories, *neither* past *nor* present, *nor* even future. We see how productive Wolfreys's 'neither/nor' can be; haunting is also neither real nor fictional, neither dead nor alive, and so on. In chapter one, I established the problematic ontological categorisation of the post-postmodern and the neo-historical aesthetic, in which the pre-postmodern commitment to narrative is contradictorily combined with the postmodern understanding that narrative cannot offer a reliable means of accessing (historical) truth. Haunting's resistance to strict categorisation is thus productive for also resisting the assumption that the postmodern and the pre-postmodern are mutually incompatible categories. This is another way in which haunting's non-dialectical, non-contradictory nature provides a productive site for the work of the neo-historical aesthetic.

*Dark Matter*'s Jack writes in his journal: 'what haunts this place is merely *spirit*. It is not *matter*. Not as I am matter, not as this pen and notebook and table are matter. It can't hurt me. All it can do is frighten' (Paver 2010: 9; original emphasis). This emphatic distinction between matter and spirit becomes destabilised later, when the spectre chases Jack out of his hut and into the dark, constant night, setting the hut on fire in the process. It is possible that these events are the product of Jack's own psychosis, and they may not directly be caused by a spectre that has matter. It could be that his *rur* has got the better of him, and the fire may be caused by the dog, Isaak, kicking over the lantern, or by Jack's frantic scrambling that leads to the stove being kicked over. But it is also possible with that uncertain blurring of categories—neither truth nor fiction, neither haunting nor psychosis—that the ghost itself has caused the event, which might, or might not, require a physical body/matter. As such, Jack's sharp distinction between spirit and matter



collapses, as the neither/nor of spirit/matter is also pulled into the non-dialectical logical economy of haunting. Ghosts then, throughout this chapter, will sometimes be corporeal, sometimes spiritual, and sometimes something else entirely, just as Jack's ghost shows itself to be both and neither simultaneously.

Beyond this sense of ontological blurring—which also recalls the liminality of the middlebrow, the sense of being in between *and* both things at once—Derrida's work on spectres can also offer another revealing dimension to spectrality, which will be essential to the analysis that follows: the concept of the *trace*. As Nicholas Royle (1997: 391; original emphasis) puts it in his review of *Specters of Marx* (or his *re*-view, as he toys with the 're' of Derrida's *returning revenant*):

If deconstruction is inseparable from a logic of spectrality, it is because the trace or *différance* is ghostly: all language, every manifestation of meaning, is the phantom effect of a trace which is neither present nor absent, but which is the condition of possibility of the opposition of presence and absence. The trace cannot become present, or absent, in its essence: it is the revenant at the origin.

He highlights that Derrida uses the trace to identify how deconstruction works; this is a 'hauntology', in which all language, and all meaning, is about ghostly presence. This is the troubled there/not there logic of signification, in which the object to which a term refers can only be spectrally present—but present nonetheless—in the word itself. In making the 'neither present nor absent' trace the 'condition of the possibility of the opposition of presence and absence', Royle identifies these ontological blurrings, but also the complete integration of haunting into Derrida's deconstructive logic. As Derrida (2006: 202) writes: 'it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. This is what we would be calling here a hauntology'. In terms of deconstruction, then, when we examine and interpret signifiers—Royle's 'manifestations of meaning'—we are interpreting and locating the haunting trace presences/absences of the signifieds to which they refer.

This has further links to the neo-historical aesthetic, most prominently in the non-chronological haunting presence of twenty-first-century meanings and ideas, within the language used to articulate fictionalised historical settings. This chapter will read anachronisms as haunted objects within the neo-historical setting. However, much more expansively than this, what Derrida's spectres and trace offer is a kind of haunting methodology, in which the meaning and interpretation of (sort of) literal ghosts in the texts—*Dark Matter*, *The Others*, and *The Awakening*—link inextricably to the post-

postmodern nature of the neo-historical aesthetic itself. This is not to adhere too naively to the position that Roger Luckhurst (2002: 542) critiques when he raises concerns that the ‘spectral turn’ is inevitably limited ‘if all it can describe is a repeated structure or generalized “spectral process”—perhaps most particularly when critics suggest the breaching of limits is itself somehow inherently political’. In agreement with Luckhurst, this assumption that the spectral is inherently political is not the methodology I propose. It is not the ontological breadth of spectrality in these texts that defines their politics, so much as the way they use spectrality to identify and manipulate the relationship to history, the past, and narrative in the current post-postmodern condition. Or as Wendy Brown (2001: 145) helpfully simplifies it: ‘When we have arrived at the putative end of history, should it surprise us if history reappears in the form of a haunt?’ Haunting is not ‘inherently political’, but when deployed in a way that responds to the ‘putative end of history’, it develops a politics of non-chronological history.

I will now analyse how the definitions of haunting that I have here established are manifested in *The Others*, *Dark Matter*, and *The Awakening*. The next section of the chapter will explore *The Others* and how its ghosts and their haunted narrative structures mean that they participate in an anachronic *and* multi-chronological neo-historical aesthetic.

### **The Others and the spectral relationship to linear history**

Alejandro Amenábar’s *The Others* is an ‘English Gothic’ ghost story (de Groot 2016: 120), in which Grace—a devout Catholic—inhabits a spooky, mist-enshrouded country house in Jersey in 1945. Grace lives with her two photosensitive children, Anne and Nicholas, whose health condition means that they must be protected from sunlight and be kept in the dark (there are parallels here to *Dark Matter*’s constant darkness). The narrative begins with the arrival of three servants—Mrs Mills, Mr Tuttle, and Lydia—who are fortuitously looking for work the day after Grace’s previous servants disappeared without giving notice. Anne and Nicholas (Anne in particular) experience an increasing number of ghostly visitations over the course of the film, and Grace’s initial dismissal of the children’s fears soon gives way to a troubling realisation that ‘There is something in this house. Something diabolic. Something which is not... Not at rest’ (Amenábar 2001: 00:50). The hauntings escalate (as does Grace’s emotional instability) through various disturbing disembodied, and occasionally alarmingly embodied, haunting events. This continues until three final realisations shock Grace: firstly, the servants are Victorian ghosts; secondly, she, Anne, and Nicholas are, in fact, ghosts themselves, after Grace

murdered her children and committed suicide; and thirdly, the hauntings they have experienced were actually caused by the living people who moved into the house subsequently, along with their medium who is attempting to contact the dead family.

In relation to narrative, *The Others* has a specifically neo-historical relevance, in that it offers a vision of non-linear past and present interaction in an otherwise linearly coherent narrative. As Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (1999: 11; original emphasis) write:

The question of the *revenant* neatly encapsulates deconstructive concerns about the impossibility of conceptually solidifying the past. Ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present. However, the ghost cannot be properly said to belong to the past [...]

As they say, ‘Ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present’, which is how Nicholas understands his haunting when he is frightened and suggests: ‘Perhaps they’re ghosts who lived in this house before’ (Amenábar 2001: 00:38). By suggesting that living people in the past became their present ghosts, Nicholas insists that the haunting is caused by presumably dead ghosts from the past—who *lived* in this house before—which *return*, are *revenant* in a commonly portrayed linear structure of haunting. This is the past-to-present trajectory that Buse and Stott articulate.

However, they also follow Derrida in suggesting a more radical, non-linear structure to haunting, in which the irruption of the past into the present is connected to the future by a structure of anticipation: ‘ghosts do not just represent reminders of the past—in their fictional representation they often demand something of the future’. This combination and interconnection of temporalities acts as a radical disruption to a ‘rigid sense of chronology’ (Buse and Stott 1999: 14, 11). The anticipation of ghosts pervades *The Others*, in its darkened Gothic country house setting, which is full of mysterious sounds and spooky mysteries; the effects of the spectres are genuinely startling, as doors slam, curtains disappear, and Anne’s body appears to become replaced by that of an elderly woman. However, in Nicholas’s assertion that the ghosts may have come from the past—he is perhaps even attempting to de-spectralise them by insisting that they ‘belonged’ to it—there is an effort to manage them through the imposition of a troubled, but still broadly linear, structure to the haunting. Ghosts come from the past into the present, in this structure, and while this might disrupt a ‘rigid sense of chronology’, it is not the wildly radical ‘anachronism *par excellence*’ that Buse and Stott (1999: 14; original emphasis) read as the multi-chronological potential of haunting either.

Buse and Stott's oxymoronic phrase 'conceptually solidifying' is challenging, and insists that it is an 'impossibility', which reinforces the spectrality of the 'concept' itself. Articulating the revenant's 'impossibility of conceptually solidifying the past'—and the productiveness of this deconstructive metaphor—offers another post-postmodern context with which the neo-historical aesthetic interacts. I have discussed at length the problematic de-legitimisation of historical narrative in postmodernism, and the ways in which the neo-historical aesthetic offers a post-postmodern response to this. Buse and Stott also productively, although entirely implicitly, suggest that the Derridean spectre has, in fact, *contributed* to this changed relationship to history in the present day. As I quoted previously, Derrida (2006: 202) writes in *Specters of Marx*, 'it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time'. Haunting is at the heart of any conceptualisation of time, and, therefore, in Buse and Stott's words, this emphasises the 'impossibility of conceptually solidifying the past'. They therefore imply that the spectre has come to emphasise, or to *reiterate*, that the past is inaccessible through narrative.

Buse and Stott (1999: 14) also write that:

Traditional history has maintained an ideal of an inert sense of the past, a past whose 'passing' can be accurately measured, and whose attributes can be quantified. It can be said that relatively recent historicisms, such as the 'New Historicism' of the past fifteen years or so, have not been happy to leave the notion of a sealed capsule of past time unchallenged. However, they too have continued to consort with the notion of isolating an actuality of past experience.

They highlight the New Historicist position, which they delineate through the work of Stephen Greenblatt, whose 'I began with a desire to speak with the dead', in his *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988: 1), sat at the foundation of this movement and its desire to *engage* with figures from the past—rather than just narrating them, as postmodernism came to insist that this was an inadequate means to represent historical experience. Greenblatt was alert to the potentiality of spectrality in this—with his medium-like attempt to speak with the dead (a reminder of Hilary Mantel in the introduction to the thesis) theoretically allowing dead figures from the past to be contemporaneously revived in his work and thus to speak for themselves and not be spoken for. Buse and Stott (1999: 14), however, argue that this was 'little more than a phonocentric fantasy, "the dead" simply acting as shorthand for the current mortal state of the previously living people to whom he would like to talk'. They view Greenblatt as having straightforwardly

sought to identify and articulate the past as a coherent entity. Instead of understanding the potentiality of spectrality as an inchoate and cross-temporal methodology, he still saw ‘the dead’ Elizabethans as *dead*, not spectrally present. He remained committed in this work, then, to a linear chronology.

There is an analogy here for Nicholas’s experience as he attempts to manage the haunting in *The Others* by creating a linear logic of past to present for it. He commits to a ‘traditional history’, in Buse and Stott’s terms, in which he would be able to push the past *into* being ‘inert’, and thus to find a kind of coherence to his spectral, incoherent experiences of haunting. He effectively acts like Greenblatt, in attempting to read the dead *as dead* rather than as spectrally present—they ‘*lived* in this house *before*’ so are definitively dead. In this respect, we might interpret Nicholas is connected to Jerome de Groot’s (2016: 109) interpretation of haunting in recent historical fiction, wherein he comments that:

[...] the past is uncanny in its appearance in the present, its uncategorized, problematic return to haunt the now. If the past is uncanny and unsettling during its incursions into the present, History is a way of attempting to organize, narrativize, and control this fracturing, problematic echo, to make it speak or silence it in the archive.

Again, there is that awareness of the Freudian uncanny, here invoked to suggest the ways in which the return of the past might be experienced as discomfortingly familiar *and* unfamiliar. If ‘History’ (and more on that capitalisation of History to refer to a historiographic process below) is a means of managing this discomfort, this makes Nicholas an echo of a more traditionally chronological approach to the narrativisation of the past. In such an approach, the haunting echo—and de Groot does not acknowledge the anticipated future implied in an echo—is managed and corralled by the imposition of narrative, as Nicholas seeks to do. As is evident in this quotation, similar to my own arguments, de Groot is alert to the possibilities of haunting for an interpretation of contemporary historical fiction. However, because he focuses (as is also evident here) on how the past becomes uncannily, spectrally revived in the present in historical fictions, our arguments diverge. De Groot is less interested in the multi-chronological haunting structure—backwards and forwards—that I find so productive for defining the neo-historical aesthetic. That the echo will return is essential, for my arguments.

Nicholas pushes these hauntings into this linear structure of past to present, but neo-historical hauntings often have a much wider potentiality for the present to haunt the past

as well. Nicholas's mother, Grace, engages in a similar controlling process to him, when she tries to find photographs of past inhabitants of the house that resemble the pictures that Anne has drawn of the ghosts. Like Nicholas, Grace assumes that these people inhabited the house at some point in the past, although it is not yet clear whether she is attempting to rationalise what she believes are ghosts or to find pictures of what she assumes are living people, past inhabitants of the house, who she thinks are still occupying the empty rooms.

Instead of finding images of the 'ghosts', however, she finds a photograph album, a 'Book of the Dead'. Mrs Mills comments that, 'In the last century, I believe that they used to take photographs of the dead in the hope that their souls would go on living through the portraits' (Amenábar 2001: 00:41). The Book of the Dead, in one sense, *is* an attempt to accurately measure and quantify the past, as per Buse and Stott's definition; the photographs suggest there has been an attempt (by those living in the past, who also form a kind of implied spectral presence, the figures *behind* the camera) to preserve images of the dead and to contain them within a 'sealed capsule of past time'. However, Mrs Mills's interpretation of the book suggests something quite different from this traditional history, in that the purpose is to *open* the 'sealed capsule of time' via the photographs, to allow the dead to go on living. This representation of photography encourages the idea that 'Ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present', with the photograph as a kind of medium that allows the dead figure to survive. As Pamela Thurschwell (2009: 234) puts it, 'every photographic portrait of a person worked to evade death by appearing to stop time'. That relationship to time in photography is different from the 'sealed capsule of time', placing photographs themselves in an achronological position, immediately spectralising their subjects into a timeless revenance. Thurschwell refers explicitly to photographs of 'the living', but this sense that photography has the potential to 'evade death' links importantly to Mrs Mills's explanation of the Book of the Dead, even as Thurschwell (2009: 235) argues, following Roland Barthes, that photographs also come to signify death itself: 'the photo leads us inexorably towards death, our own and others'. We later see the death photo of the servants (Mrs Mills, Mr Tuttle, and Lydia), which, in a sense, works in both directions. It does signify their deaths, in a literalisation of this Barthesian metaphor, as it signifies that they are dead rather than living as we have previously assumed. The photograph may also offer an explanation for their continued existence after death, however: perhaps their souls have indeed lived on through their portraits.

Mrs Mills, Mr Tuttle, and Lydia are tense presences in the film, persistently shifting between the seemingly benign and the potentially threatening. When Grace has come to the conclusion that “There is something in this house. Something diabolic”, fearing that the house must be haunted by its past inhabitants, Mrs Mills is gently, if cryptically supportive:

I’ve always believed in those things. Oh they’re not easy to explain but they do happen. We’ve all heard stories of beyond. Now and then. I think that sometimes the world of the dead gets mixed up with the world of the living. (Amenábar 2001: 00:51)

That ‘Now and then’ is conspicuous in its dual potential interpretations: Mrs Mills might mean that she has heard these stories occasionally (I’ve heard stories now and then), but she might also be suggesting that such stories ‘of beyond’—a spatial metaphor—are about the collision of temporalities, the collision of *now* and *then*, whether ‘then’ is the past or the future. She may be implying that the stories are *about* ‘Now and then’. There is heavy dramatic irony in her statement, ‘I think that sometimes the world of the dead gets mixed up with the world of the living’; Grace (and the viewer, presumably) understands Mrs Mills to be acknowledging the possibility that the ghostly figures are caused by ‘the dead’, haunting ‘the living’—Grace and the children. In one of the shifts in the servants’ status, however, just a few minutes later, we see Mrs Mills derisively commenting to Mr Tuttle, ‘Now she thinks the house is haunted’, and Mr Tuttle asks Mrs Mills when she plans to bring ‘all this’ ‘out into the open’ (Amenábar 2001: 00:53). This suggests that there is a narrative at work, structured by Mrs Mills, whose uncertain position—working for good or for bad—creates tension.

However, it is the final revelation in *The Others* that ultimately demonstrates the instability of Grace’s and Nicholas’s attempts to linearise their own narrative: *they* are ‘the dead’, not ‘the living’. It is their dead world that has become non-chronologically ‘mixed up’ with the living world of the new inhabitants of the house, not the other way around, as Grace (and Nicholas, and the viewer) had previously assumed and attempted to insist upon. This means that the hauntings that have been causing fear throughout the narrative are, in fact, hauntings from the ‘present’ of the text—1945—or possibly its future; this remains unclear. Jerome de Groot (2016: 110) writes that ‘things in the fictive past’ gain ‘unpredictable life in the present’ which ‘undermines our presumed understanding of the “now”’. However, it is evident from the structure of *The Others* that this haunting also offers a post-postmodern analogy for the ways in which the *present* can gain unpredictable

life in the fictive *past*, undermining our presumed understanding of both the ‘now’ *and* the ‘then’, and of the process by which the ‘then’ comes to be interpreted through narrative in the ‘now’.

There is evidently a tension in *The Others* between a desire to manage and control the past—to corral it into narrative—and an awareness of its narrative instability; this is manifested in the pursuit of a logical chronology of past-present in haunting, but also a wider and pervasive sense in the film that these hauntings will not be contained by that chronology. The relationship that characters have to narrative and chronology in this text is an analogy for the fraught twenty-first-century relationship to a post-deconstructionist idea of ‘traditional history’. The fact that *The Others* is set in 1945 is not incidental. The events take place in a newly post-war Jersey, just after the German occupation, which gives the setting an uncertain, liminal context too. Jersey was fundamentally disconnected from Britain during its occupation, and it remained occupied until May 1945, even after the Allied forces liberated France in August 1944. This history is tensely present in the film (‘We all surrendered! The whole island was occupied!’ Grace shouts at her husband [Amenábar 2001: 01:12]), reinforcing characters’ in-betweenness.

We, the twenty-first-century viewers, are thus watching explicitly fictionalised (ghostly) figures in a narrative about the past, in which hauntings suggest the radical coexistence of past and present. Our own commitment to linear narrative—our assumption, shared with Grace, that when Mrs Mills says ‘the world of the dead gets mixed up with the world of the living’, she means that the dead have returned to haunt the living—is, in the end, exposed as a repressive commitment to chronology and to history as narrated from past to present. Repressive is an appropriate word, as Grace and her children have clearly repressed the traumatic memories of their own deaths. Mrs Mills guides and supports Grace’s gradual drawing out of those traumatic memories, ‘identifying the resistances’ in Grace’s psyche that are inhibiting her memory (Freud 2003: 33). In Freudian terms, demonstrating these resistances to Grace (as Mrs Mills points out, ‘we must all learn to live together, the living and the dead’ [Amenábar 2001: 01:28]) should allow her to interpret them and thus regain access to her missing memories. This is a scenario in which, Freud (2003: 34) suggests, the analysand almost invariably comments, ‘I’ve always known that really, I’ve just never thought about it’. Mrs Mills, as the narrative guide, helps Grace to come to this realisation, to the confrontation and acceptance of her repressed trauma (this is very similar to Maud, the housekeeper in *The Awakening*, discussed below). Through this experience of forgetting and misremembering (an achronological process



itself), the ghostly figures and events in the house thus act as some kind of present/future return that destabilises our idea of how the past can be articulated in narrative; the haunting, living family's dates remain conspicuously unclear, both in terms of the chronological year that they inhabit and the length of time they have been inhabiting the house since Grace's death. Our version of events and the assumptions upon which this historical narrative has apparently been founded are undermined by the realisation of profound narrative instability. The circumstances as we had understood them are deconstructed before our very eyes, and replaced with a sense of the radical achronological circumstances of haunting. *The Others*, then, is a post-postmodern text, one which contemplates the problematics of accessing the past through narrative *in* narrative.

In this post-postmodern sense, it is remarkable that there is a powerful commitment throughout the film to an articulation of 'what happened' on a particular day in the past. We later learn that this was the day on which Grace killed the children and herself, but, when this conversation occurs, it is still ambiguously referred to as 'that day':

Anne: And then it happened.

Nicholas: Be quiet.

Mrs Mills: What do you mean, Anne?

Anne: Mummy went... mad.

Nicholas: Nothing happened.

Anne: Yes it did.

Nicholas [shouting]: No it didn't!

Anne [shouting]: Yes it did! (Amenábar 2001: 00:11)

Grace arrives at this point and tells the children to be quiet, but after she leaves the room, Anne whispers, 'It did happen'. Like us as viewers, the children, and the narrative of the film, are committed to a specific version of events, one that Grace represses, but that emerges in the end nonetheless. This interaction between the children identifies two vehemently contradictory versions of the past, one in which 'nothing happened' and one in which an unspecified 'it' definitely 'did happen'. This draws attention to these post-postmodern conflicts between a commitment to narrative and a sense that narrative is inevitably inflected by the person narrating it, including in the 'authorial'—in this case Nicholas's—repressions of problematic pasts.

In a helpful interaction with this analysis, Wendy Brown (2001: 140) discusses certain critics' angry and hurt responses to 'poststructuralist challenges to the status of materiality and objectivity in history', i.e. the responses to postmodern deconstructions of 'traditional

history': 'Responding to formulations that challenge notions of brute facticity and that, more generally, call into question objectivist or positivist accounts of history, many of these critics proclaim: "But the Holocaust really happened!"' Obviously, this critique of postmodern challenges to 'brute facticity' is on a much wider scale than Anne and Nicholas's disagreement, but the contestation over 'what really happened' acts as a cipher for the resistance to the destabilisation of the past after postmodernism; critics—and Anne—insist that the past has some factual existence beyond the impossibility of narrating it. They insist on the 'brute facticity' of certain events. The narrative uncertainties of *The Others*, and its radical destabilisation of linear chronology, are thus further problematised by the importance of what happened on that day. After Grace is told by the present/future medium that she and the children are dead, she narrates the events of 'that day', reporting how she killed Anne, Nicholas, and herself. There is therefore a post-postmodern commitment to a narrative that *is* committed to 'brute facticity' even within the haunted, radical temporal instability of past/present/future coexistence. We, the post-postmodern viewers, also want to know 'what happened', to have the internal history of the narrative explained to us, even as we recognise the troubling unreliability, in this haunted temporal coexistence, of any narrative that distinctly separates past/present/future. Having established these troubled and troubling narrative structures in *The Others*, and the anxieties it portrays about linearity and brute facticity, I will now discuss how this is manifested in textuality, and in particular how texts within the film are positioned in an ordered relationship regarding the plausibility of their narratives.

### **Text, textuality, and haunted narrative**

These categorical blurrings of past/present/future, and of real/imaginary histories, are not unique to the contemporary moment, and neither are postmodern deconstructions of historical narrative. Ghost stories, as Derrida identifies through the ghost of Hamlet's father, have long been used to critique a simplistic version of time and history, as ghosts fundamentally deconstruct an idea of straightforward chronological progress. In one sense, the texts analysed here are no different; they are engaging in these longstanding processes of temporal critique. In another sense, though, an analysis of narrative instability in *Dark Matter*, *The Awakening*, and *The Others* can reveal a specificity to these recent texts, in that we see them negotiating the post-Derridean landscape. Every attempt to read text spectrally is an act of 'performative interpretation' according to Derrida (2006:

63), which ‘transforms the very thing it interprets’, and, as such, these newly spectral methodologies have transformed the way we write, read, and interpret ghosts in the twenty-first century. Having situated the response to postmodern deconstructions of history in the (somewhat conservative) literary middlebrow, as evidenced by the neo-historical aesthetic, we might also see how Derridean ghosts have come to haunt the same cultural field in post-postmodernism. As María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013b: 32) write, *Specters of Marx* ‘is generally considered the main catalyst for the late-twentieth-century surge in explorations of ghosts and haunting’.

As I have demonstrated, one way in which this becomes apparent is in the narrative instabilities of texts such as *The Others*, wherein characters manifest a troubled and uncertain relationship to their own real/not real pasts, and narrate them even within tensely anachronic contexts. These neo-historical ghost stories also produce specific relationships to different orders of text, emphasising the status of some over others and negotiating a range of relationships to ‘reality’ as manifested through textual and narrative experience. They dramatise the processes of transformative spectral interpretation, indicating a specifically post-postmodern relationship to text, in which these blurring conflicts of haunted postmodern history are, at times, combined with a politically conservative and strong commitment to ‘brute facticity’. Anne in *The Others* is adamant that the haunting presences in the house are not ghosts, because ghosts ‘go about in white sheets and carry chains’ and claims she has seen them do so ‘at night’.

Mrs Mills: Now Anne, why do you make up such stories?

Anne: I don’t, I read them in books.

Mrs Mills: Well you shouldn’t believe everything that you read in books.

Anne: That’s what our mother says. She says that all this stuff about ghosts is rubbish. And *then* she expects us to believe everything written in the bible.

Mrs Mills: And don’t you believe it?

Anne: I believe some things. But for example, I don’t believe that God made the world in seven days. And I don’t believe that Noah got all of those animals into one boat. Or the holy spirit is a dove.

Nicholas: No, I don’t believe that either.

Anne: Doves are anything but holy.

Nicholas: They poo on our windows. (Amenábar 2001: 00:39)

Anne is managing her own relationship to texts and to interpretation. She is aware that texts can be false, that narratives can be misleading, and she is making her own

judgements, including judging the bible on what she sees as issues of its plausibility. This is especially noticeable in the face of her mother's ordering of texts, expecting faith in one text—the bible—and denying the possibility of another's veracity. Anne is placed in the position of a post-postmodernist, more aware than her mother of the possible fallibility of narrative *and* of its wider possibilities. Both Anne and Nicholas have judged the bible stories to be implausible. Nicholas's 'They poo on our windows' as an argument against the holy spirit being a dove indicates that these plausibilities are based on the children's own experiences of the world, and that those experiences diverge from the representations of it that they have observed in written texts. In one sense, Anne is resisting the blurring of categories such as real/not real, but in another, she is expanding the possibilities of texts she has been told are 'true' versus ones she has been told are 'rubbish', i.e. she is blurring the lines of fact/fiction.

Anne thus makes specific choices to believe in certain features of texts' content, and makes similarly engaged choices *not* to believe in other (knowingly phantasmic, or spectral) textual projections, such as the holy spirit as a dove. She refuses to 'assume the reality' (in Julian Wolfreys's phrase [2002: xiii]) of anything she reads, but instead offers an interpretively engaged relationship both to what Brown calls 'brute facticity' and to the possibilities of fiction. Neither those texts she has been told are factual, *nor* those she has been told are fictional, are given a prioritised relationship to 'truth'. The apparitionality, then, of the ghostly figures in texts becomes an expansive means for all textuality to gain some kind of authority—at least in Anne's post-postmodern figuring of it. If, after Derrida, all texts are always haunted, then we are free to engage in our own ordering of that spectrality. Diana Wallace (2013: 3) has argued, on the capacity of the Gothic to articulate women's histories in fictionalised form (more on this below), that women's historical fictions over a long literary heritage have suggested that "There is not one "History"" but 'plural and contradictory histories'. This is the relationship to text that Anne identifies, one in which the multiplicity of text offers a multiplicity of potential engagements; there are plural and contradictory possibilities present in any one text. Anne is not a Derridean or a postmodernist, as Wolfreys (2013: xiii) is, struggling with the apparitionality of text and the way it encourages us to 'believe' in 'textual projections'. Rather, Anne is a post-postmodernist who 'believes some things' she reads in books and not others, who manages a relationship to the troubled status of text post-deconstruction. She offers an alternative: readers can *choose* what to believe in texts, after postmodernism.

Beyond this, however, we can read Anne herself as a literalisation of Derrida's hauntological metaphors. We later learn that Anne *is* a spectre; she is literally a ghost, an apparition, as well as participating in a spectralised interpretive process as a reader. Anne's relationship to reading (viewing) also becomes our interpretive process,<sup>2</sup> as we assume that Anne is 'real' (i.e. that she is alive)—just as we do with Grace, Nicholas, and the servants—only to have this 'reality' undermined by the discovery that they have been ghosts throughout the film's narrative. We are thus reminded, as is often the case with twist endings, of the breadth and capacity of fictionality for including these uncertain fictions and unrealities, for encouraging us to commit to one version of 'truth' that is subsequently undermined (see also, for example, the end of Ian McEwan's *Atonement* [2001], and the discovery that the 'fiction' we believed was 'real' may, in fact, have been invented by another fictional character).<sup>3</sup> *The Others* is set in a fictionalised 1945, and thus this shift from the 'real' to the unreliably spectral in our understanding of these characters metaphorically represents the neo-historical shift from assuming that a historical narrative is committed to 'brute facticity', to a recognition of a much more spectralised relationship to historical 'truth'. The movement from believing in 'reality' to understanding the spectrality behind any representation of historical reality is intrinsic to the neo-historical aesthetic.

Derrida (quoted in Wolfreys 2002: xiii) argues that the spectre exists 'between the real and the fictional[,] between that which is neither real nor fictional' (neither/nor again). Anne, as a fictional ghost who we temporarily believed was a fictional living person, is inhabiting this strange spectral middle ground, in which the gaps between reality and fictionality can be played with in the formation of new histories. Anne as spectre and as interpreter offers a new, neo-historical and post-postmodern relationship to history, in which the spectralising process of interpretation offers a new way of ordering text. And this is what Anne, and the other ghostly characters in *The Others*, can offer: spectrality as a (troubled) solution to the deconstructions and destabilisations of postmodern history. The need for such a solution might, again, identify this overall project as broadly conservative, seeking to neutralise and calm the radical deconstructions of postmodernism in a middlebrow setting.

There is an extended neo-historical dimension to the character of Anne and her process of interpretation. Anne is a ghost, interpreting a set of texts and managing a relationship to 'truth' and belief in their content. Anne-as-spectre's interpretive acts show that she is both delineating what is real/not real *and*, contradictorily, by her spectral nature,

she is radically spectralising the interpretive process of determining those lines. By being a ghost who represents our own post-postmodern relationship to text, Anne therefore metaphorically (loosely) suggests that we, as readers, spectralise *ourselves* in the process of interpreting these haunted neo-historical texts. ‘Brute facticity’ is replaced with a spectral interpretation, i.e. interpretation open to spectrality, and interpretation *of* spectrality, but also interpretation *by* a spectre.<sup>4</sup> We are reminded of the intangibility of the past even in its fictionalised, textual forms, and thus our own spectral presence in relation to it. As in other manifestations of the neo-historical aesthetic, then, in *The Others*, we see how haunting can offer a metaphor for contemporary history, but in this case, also for the complexities of a twenty-first-century relationship to history *as it is manifested in factual or fictional texts*. With this Derridean structure in mind, in which spectrality deliberately inhabits the gaps of interpretation, I will now discuss how neo-historical aesthetics work within these gaps, and indicate another reason that spectrality is such an appropriate form for the aesthetic itself.

### **Haunting and uncertainty: Working within the gap between fiction and reality**

In chapter one, I discussed the *certainty* and *plausibility* of the narratives in which the neo-historical aesthetic generally appears, and haunting throws a spectral spanner into these works, because, of course, hauntings such as those that appear in these novels are not generally accepted to be plausible at all, but are entertainingly scary and very deliberate deviations from ‘known’ reality. While we might suspend our disbelief for the duration of the film, as is required for its haunting to be effective, this is not to suggest that we ‘believe’ in ghosts as a consequence of this. Stating this does not necessarily entail a movement away from spectrality as a critical tool, but rather acknowledges that the explicitness of such ghosts often goes beyond the dubious simultaneous presences and absences of Derridean hauntings. Ghosts as a critical and metaphorical tool do exist ‘between the real and the fictional[,] between that which is neither real nor fictional’, but this is not to suggest that the kinds of ghosts we see in *The Others*, those that literally go bump in the night, that are invisible and overturn tables and slam doors, are necessarily ‘real’.

These issues of plausibility are played out very effectively in the opening scene of *The Awakening*, in which protagonist Florence Cathcart unmasks a séance, drawing immediate attention to the ways in which the apparent haunting has tricked us, led us to believe the

implausible—within the film’s narrative. *The Awakening* is set in 1921 and opens with a textual onscreen quotation:

OBSERVATION: Between 1914 and 1919 war and influenza have claimed more than a million lives in Britain alone.

CONCLUSION: This is a time for ghosts.

Florence Cathcart, ‘Seeing Through Ghosts’, p.7.

(Murphy 2011: 00:01)

The overall narrative of the film tracks ‘ghost hunter’ and ghost debunker Florence Cathcart’s visit to a Cumbrian boys’ school (Murphy 2011: 00:08), to investigate the death of a child—Walter—who appears to have died of fright. Walter complained the day before his death that he was being haunted by the ghostly apparition of a boy, which is why a teacher at the school, Robert Mallory, calls in Florence. After a night spent at the school, Florence reveals the banal explanations for the various different ‘hauntings’ that took place, and finds the cause of the boy’s death to be emphatically non-ghostly: he was forced outside in the cold, was very frightened, and had an asthma attack as a consequence, which killed him. However, after this debunking, there remain unresolved haunting mysteries, which are then revealed to be genuinely ghostly in nature—if Florence’s and Robert’s experiences are to be believed.

In the opening scene, before we have learnt of Florence’s scepticism about haunting, she attends a London-based séance appearing to be a genuine punter, pursuing news from beyond the grave of her—as we later learn, real—lover who died in the trenches and whose photograph she lovingly clutches in her hand. This is our first introduction to Florence, and we have no reason to assume she is not just as committed to the séance as all the other people in attendance appear to be. As the séance develops, among other spooky occurrences: a raven is killed by the medium and immediately, supernaturally, begins to rot; two members of the circle suddenly develop nosebleeds; and candles suddenly go out, with no apparent cause. One of the members of the circle has a bell jar placed in front of her. She sees the spectral image of a child in the jar, next to her own reflection. Florence abruptly unmask all of these spectral and spooky apparitions as various shams, the decomposing raven was an unobserved replacement, the circle members who had nosebleeds were in on the deception and had ‘blood capsules’, the wicks were pulled from the candles from underneath, and the spectral child is not spectral at all, but a living child positioned behind the woman to show a reflection in the jar. This

unmasking is very effective: ‘you’re charlatans’, says Florence, ‘and poor ones, at that’ (Murphy 2011: 00:04-05).

Having been told ‘this is a time for ghosts’ in the opening onscreen text, the viewer is anticipating a scary, horror thriller—they have been prepared for it, by this text, by trailers to the film, by its blurbs, and by the ghostly images left after ‘this is a time for ghosts’ has disappeared from the screen. In this sense, we could argue, with Jacques Derrida and Wendy Brown in mind, that viewers’ anticipation of the appearance of ghosts in the narrative is partly what haunts this scene, as discussed previously. As Derrida puts it: ‘The *revenant* is going to come’. In this anticipation of a revenant, viewers share an experience with those members of the séance circle who are genuinely hoping to be visited by their loved ones, anticipating their returns and interpreting what they see in a certain way, as a consequence. The woman who sees the reflection of the child in the bell jar is attending the séance in the hope of making contact with her dead daughter, and interprets the child she sees as that daughter, in spite of minimal similarities in the two children’s appearance. The fact that we share this gullible anticipation with the character speaks to an important part of spectralised interpretation in post-postmodernity, suggesting that we see what we want to see in these haunted histories. After Florence unmasks the deceptions, this woman hits her, shouting ‘you’ve never had a child, have you? No, of course you haven’t’ (Murphy 2011: 00:06). Not relieved by her disillusionment, the woman’s response suggests that she was consoled by the fictional ghosts with which she was presented, that her grief was assuaged by these fictions. *The Awakening* thus establishes a context in which—as in *The Others*—certain characters give a higher status to fictions than to the ‘truth’ behind the ‘grotesque charade’ that Florence exposes (Murphy 2011: 00:05).

The sources of fear in this scene, in which both viewers and some characters were entirely invested, are revealed to be trivial and banal manipulations of the characters’ griefs, although they are nonetheless ones in which the characters are apparently very willing to invest. Grief is inevitably suggested by the immediately post-war historical date: 1921. ‘This is a time for ghosts’ indeed, but these words, from the book Florence has written on unmasking séances, *Seeing Through Ghosts*, come to mean that this is a time when people, herself included, *long for* ghosts. Florence’s adoptive (although we do not learn this until later) mother says, ‘We always know why you throw yourself into this, and we don’t blame you for thinking that it will help. But every time now, all we can see is the pain it causes you’. Florence is grieving the loss of a loved one—‘your soldier boy’, as one of the unmasked conspirators puts it—and these comments from her mother suggest that she



is unmasking these séances in the hope of finding one that reveals a genuine connection to the dead (Murphy 2011: 00:09, 00:05).

When she meets Robert Mallory and he proposes another ghostly apparition might exist, one that would have been a child between 1902 and 1906, Florence says, ‘You don’t need me to tell you what happened to that generation of boys, Mr Mallory, and yet you don’t see their ghosts walking around everywhere’ (Murphy 2011: 00:13). This is similar to Jack in *Dark Matter*, who, after seeing a dead body pulled out of the Thames, writes in his journal: ‘I wondered how many others had died in it, and why doesn’t it have more ghosts?’ (Paver 2010: 11) Evidently the fact that the dead do not all return as ghosts is a source of some consternation to those who have not yet experienced hauntings (although it is perhaps telling that both characters soon will). However, this is especially the case in an interwar setting, and *The Awakening* is set in 1921, *Dark Matter* in 1937. In times of such profound historical grief, with so many people suffering loss, in commenting on the conspicuous absence of the ghosts of the war dead, professional sceptic Florence highlights the implausibility of there being just one ghost, the single boy she has been told is haunting the school.

The viewer is duped in a number of different ways over the first half of the film, by both the haunting in the opening scene, and that in the school, and this is partly the consequence of the introductory quotation. Because this is taken from the fictional text internal to the film, a book written by Florence, it sits in an interesting location in the different orders of texts already discussed. Robert Mallory says, ‘Your book sits alongside the bible in many households,’ and the school matron, Maud Hill, tells Florence, ‘I’ve read your book a thousand times. I keep it on my bookshelf next to the bible’ (Murphy 2011: 00:18). These are deliberate attempts both to flatter Florence, and to emphasise the status of her text, although Florence’s sarcastic dismissal of religion—‘Boys believe in Santa Claus and the tooth fairy. I’m sure some of them even believe in God’—suggests that this link between her book and the bible is unlikely to impress or flatter her (Murphy 2011: 00:13). Having a quotation from Florence’s apparently highly-regarded book as the epigraph to the film has the interesting effect of shoring up the authority of the fictions within the film. *Seeing Through Ghosts*—an interestingly ambiguous title, referring to both seeing through the deception of ghosts, and seeing through the lens of spectrality—is treated as a legitimate treatise, even implying that it might be an extra-textual text, one that exists outside of the film’s narrative. This subtly implies that perhaps the events of this narrative are ‘real’ too (Florence Cathcart is fairly plausible as a real figure who could

have been obscured by History, and whose book might have really existed). However, we have also been misled by that opening séance itself; our suspension of disbelief has been proved to be misguided. This is an informative twist on Julian Wolfreys's (2002: xiii) paradigm, in which 'we misrecognise [fictional characters] as images of "real" people', when, he argues, they are in fact 'textual projections, apparitions if you will, images or phantasms'. Instead, here, we have believed in the apparitions, believed in the haunting that appeared to be taking place during the séance; instead of assuming the 'reality' of characters and thus ignoring their spectral presences, we assumed the reality of the *spectres*.

There are more unmaskings of fake hauntings that we had previously committed to as real—and experienced the startling effects of—throughout the film. At the school, Florence has observed various spooky events, and literally unmask one of the children, showing the pillowcase he wore on his head when he pretended to be a ghost (Murphy 2011: 00:39). Similarly, Walter's death, is revealed to be the fault of a teacher, Malcolm McNair, whom we have observed being violent to the boys on other occasions. He appears to be suffering from a post-traumatic crisis after the First World War, and locked Walter outside: 'You can't die of fear', Malcolm says. 'No', Florence agrees, 'but you can die of an asthma attack brought on by it' (Murphy 2011: 00:24-25, 00:41). Again, the legacy of the First World War is explicitly present, with some thoughtful foreshadowing of the Second World War, which we as viewers know is to come: 'I thought I'd toughen him up', Malcolm says. 'It's not enough to be mollycoddled, Robert. These boys must be strong. Stronger than us' (Murphy 2011: 00:41-42). All of these unmaskings combine to create an air of anti-spectral scepticism in the film, although it is worth noting that they do not necessarily undermine the frightening effects of each subsequent haunting event. Again, we as viewers are left in anticipation, waiting for that future spectre that will puncture the scepticism in reverse, showing ghosts to be 'real'. In these latter two unmaskings, there are some unresolved elements that remain unexplained by Florence's rational narratives: the distorted face of a screaming child that appeared quite different from the living boy pretending to be a ghost, and a man in nineteenth-century clothes, carrying a shotgun. We suspect that at some point the ghosts will be made real, that our belief in their spectrality will be justified, and it is, in a narrative return of the repressed that reveals entirely forgotten traumas from Florence's childhood. We learn that Tom, the child who has accompanied Maud throughout the film, is in fact not visible to Robert, but is the ghost of Florence's beloved half-brother, the memory of whom has been repressed, because their father killed him in a drunken rage, in which he also killed

Florence's mother and himself. Tom is the ghost haunting the school, which Florence learns was actually her childhood home (Murphy 2011: 01:24-30).

It is not entirely straightforward, however, to identify these ghosts as 'real', because there are again puzzling uncertainties in the haunting, most notably that it is only Florence, Maud, and one or two of the boys who seem able to see Tom. He might, in fact, be a figment of Florence's (and Maud's) traumatised imagination—fed by the return to her childhood home and the revival of past traumas. Like Jack, Florence is put in an uncertain position with regard to the reliability of her mental state; she appears to attempt suicide before she learns the 'truth' about Tom and her past. In a final twist of uncertainty, Maud attempts to poison Florence and herself, because she wants to bring her family back together in death and haunting, but it is unclear whether Florence is able to get to the antidote in time. In the final scenes we see her walking through the school, unacknowledged by staff and students—except for one child who also saw Tom. She walks past the headteacher, who says of her, 'I suspect she wasn't altogether well herself. You know, I read a study last term; ladies' minds often can't cope with further education' (Murphy 2011: 01:40). This is unclear, suggesting that Florence might in fact have died and now be a ghost herself, but also suggesting that she may have mental health problems that led to her hallucinating the haunting. Or, suggesting that the haunting was real but Florence survived the attempted murder.

Buse and Stott (1999: 12) write:

Deconstruction's ghosts, then, are considerably different from those found in the majority of fictional haunting narratives with which we have been familiar. While there are certain celebrated exceptions [...], fictional phantoms are usually banished by the imposition of closure at the end of the narrative.

*The Awakening* demonstrates an explicit resistance to such closure, with each twist of true/false reinforcing that its ghosts inhabit this space 'between the real and the fictional[,] between that which is neither real nor fictional'. Without closure at the end of the narrative, the ghost of Tom is, ultimately, both real and not-real, a figment of Florence's troubled imagination, *and* the revenant of her murdered brother. He is both a 'real' and an imaginary ghost at the same time, with the ontological uncertainty of this haunting making it very much one of 'deconstruction's ghosts'. Without narrative closure or certainty, Tom continues to occupy this space between the real and the fictional. In this film, then, the boundaries of plausibility and implausibility are tested and repeatedly moved—as is the case in numerous other narratives about ghosts. Spectrality is therefore

another way through which we are reminded that these neo-historical narratives are fictions, but that they use the ontological uncertainty of haunting to test the limitations of too strict an understanding of what ‘fiction’ actually means. Haunting, as Derrida argues, expands the gaps between fiction and reality, such that, even if we do not believe in ghosts, texts such as this one can still offer alternative ways of doing history, in which fiction’s possibilities are wider than we might have previously thought. In such spaces, the boundaries of the real/not real/fictional/non-fictional and those textual spaces that are *none of these* do not need to be clearly demarcated.

Again, the flexibility of the neo-historical aesthetic is productive. It is evidently manifested slightly differently in texts about hauntings than in the previous texts I have discussed—no longer calm assertions of historical fact even as the possibility of accessing those facts through narrative is anachronistically deconstructed—but the neo-historical aesthetic emerges through and alongside implausibility, still deconstructing narrative, but to different degrees and through different methods. It is helpful, at this point, to again consider genres in which haunting, particularly in relation to imagining histories, has been prominently used. The next section will thus consider how neo-Victorianism and the Gothic are both similar to and different from the neo-historical aesthetic.

### **Neo-Victorianism, Gothic literature, and their relationships to the haunted neo-historical aesthetic**

An important genre related to the neo-historical aesthetic has come to be called ‘neo-Victorianism’, and it similarly plays with the ontological gaps of fact and fiction, creating and imagining histories, often for those marginalised from mainstream historical discourse. In general, neo-Victorian texts share with the neo-historical aesthetic the distinction from their predecessor, historiographic metafiction, and they similarly play with and manipulate the gaps between ‘fiction’ and ‘history’ to offer new narratives that embrace and are challenged by their postmodern heritages. In 1997, Dana Shiller first defined the ‘neo-Victorian’—to which the term ‘neo-historical’ is indebted—in an analysis of A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990) and Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* (1987), and also supported by Fredric Jameson’s works. Shiller (1997: 538) hints at the temporal contradiction that I see as post-postmodern—looking both to postmodernism and before it—when she writes that neo-Victorianism is ‘at once characteristic of postmodernism and imbued with a historicity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century novel’.

Later studies of neo-Victorianism including Kate Mitchell's and Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's works, have examined contemporary texts set in the Victorian period, from Sarah Waters's first three novels, to Christopher Nolan's magician fable *The Prestige* (2006), and to Gail Jones's *Sixty Lights* (2004, which I discuss in the next chapter). Diana Wallace (2013: 11) argues that 'An important subset of historiographic metafiction is what has come to be termed the "neo-Victorian novel"'. Wallace observes historical continuities in the two genres, and as such sees neo-Victorianism as intimately connected to—even a subset of—historiographic metafiction.

I would argue, however, that neo-Victorian literature is a participant in the neo-historical aesthetic, which is itself a descendant of (and, in some ways, a regression to a moment before) historiographic metafiction. Neo-Victorian texts, like neo-historical ones, often contain demonstrable anachronistic awareness of the difference between themselves and their Victorian antecedents, and in this sense they *do* self-reflexively mark their difference from nineteenth-century texts. My discussion of 'queer' in Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian *Tipping the Velvet*, below, makes this clear. These are not just Victorian replications. They 'blur[...] the boundaries between fiction and fact, literature and life' as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2010: 22, 4; original emphasis) argue, suggesting that this is '*more than* historical fiction set in the nineteenth century', and it 'must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*'. Neo-Victorian texts, Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest, actually do have this 'self-analytic drive' that Kate Mitchell (2010: 117) argues is sometimes absent. They argue instead that there are 'clear continuities between neo-Victorian fiction and historiographic metafiction', and while I might be inclined to suggest that these continuities are not quite as linear as this implies, I do agree that there are connections between the two. This self-analytic work in neo-Victorianism is crucial, in the 'ways in which the present is negotiated through a range of (re)interpretations of the nineteenth century' (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 3).

In this latter quotation, remove the 'nineteenth century', and replace it with 'the past' and a working definition of the neo-historical aesthetic emerges. '(Re)interpretations' suggestively gestures towards this process of looking at the known past and then creating new, conspicuously present-influenced stories through and about it. However, substituting 'the past' for 'the nineteenth century' evades neo-Victorianism's uniqueness. Rosario Arias (2014: 21), in her contribution to Elodie Rousselot's *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction*, suggests that we should 'read "neo-historical"' when we

see the word ‘neo-Victorian’, but the situation is not that simple. Heilmann and Llewellyn (2010: 3, 5) refer in a number of ways to ‘the strength of our desire for harking back to the Victorian’ and ‘the contemporary endurance, even reinvigoration, of our fascination with the Victorians’, even as they insist that this is ‘more than’ literature set in this period. This echoes a frequent, and convincing, argument in neo-Victorian studies (Kaplan 2007; Llewellyn 2008), that we in the present have a specific connection with—or fetishisation of—the nineteenth century. Neo-Victorianism deconstructs the process of doing history, and thus participates in an authentic neo-historical aesthetic, but the neo-historical also offers a cross-period engagement with this process.

Wolfreys (2013: 154), meanwhile, reads neo-Victorian novels as haunting the margins of ‘their predecessor-texts’, the nineteenth-century novels with which he, like Kate Mitchell, sees the neo-Victorians as directly engaging. He argues that the ghostly action of neo-Victorian novels is ‘called up by a desire to know what we call the “past”’, in the present, i.e. in a moment that is ‘supposedly distinct from that past’ (though he is troubled by the articulation of the present as a unified ‘simple and full’ entity). However, in suggesting that these novels are spectrally bringing forth and ‘finding what was always already there’ in historical narrative, ‘a ghostly entity possibly misremembered in some act of cultural, ideological or historical paramnesia’, Wolfreys (2013: 150) undermines the imaginative element in this spectral historical fiction. He does not acknowledge the creativity in that ‘moment of conjuration’ of the spectral past, whether in imaginatively creating troublingly and ideologically occluded histories, or in deconstructing the processes of historical narrative more generally. Wolfreys does emphasise the ghostly revenant that is integral to this process, however.

Diana Wallace (2013) writes of the ways in which women writers have long used the mode of the Gothic to write their histories, histories that have otherwise been marginalised from traditional hegemonic, heteropatriarchal historiography. Women writers have used this imaginative gap that spectrality—along with other Gothic tropes—can offer. Women’s exclusion from narratives about the past and from dominant heteropatriarchal ‘History’ has, according to Wallace (2013: 3), ‘often made them sceptical about mainstream historical narratives in ways which have proven fruitful for their fiction’. She helpfully defines the difference between the two h/Histories: ‘how do we shape accounts of what happened in the past (the events of “history”) into narratives (“History”)?’ (Wallace 2013: 2); in other words, ‘History’ is what I have, in this chapter following Buse and Stott, been calling ‘traditional history’, and elsewhere have called

‘canonical history’. Women’s awareness of their own marginalisation from History (i.e. the narratives that have been written about the past) has informed their fictions in hugely productive ways, for many years, meaning that ‘fiction has been one of the primary ways in which women writers have written history, and written themselves into “History”’ (Wallace 2013: 2-3). Women have used their fictions to take control of their exclusion from dominant narratives about the past.

I have emphasised this elsewhere, but it bears repetition: it would be misguided at best, and exclusionary of a long tradition of women’s writing at worst, to suggest that the kinds of intellectual and political revisionism that the neo-historical aesthetic is engaged in are *new*. Women writers have been using fictional accounts to shift the subject- and object-positions of historical narrative for a long time, and have used the Gothic, according to Wallace, to further open up an imaginative space in which plausibility and reality are expanded, through which these historical accounts can accrue a certain illegitimate legitimacy. My arguments about the neo-historical aesthetic, however, rely on the idea that, as a consequence of postmodernism, we have entered a historical moment in which this scepticism towards the construction of historical narratives has entered the (middlebrow) mainstream. Wallace engages directly with this when she analyses Sarah Waters’s 1999 Gothic novel *Affinity*.

This is another reminder, then, that while there are aspects of the neo-historical aesthetic that are profoundly contemporary in their responses to postmodernism, the aesthetic is also functioning within a longstanding tradition of resistant, revisionist (re)histories. These women’s histories are convincingly interpreted by Wallace as politically resistant to hegemony. This is not always the case with the neo-historical aesthetic, which, as I have discussed, can sometimes appear to be quite reactionary or conservative in its comfortingly middlebrow politics. However, there do remain points of important crossover between these women’s literary Gothic and historical texts and the work of the neo-historical aesthetic. Wallace (2013: 2), with reference to historian Mary R. Beard, analyses the way that women have been constructed in narratives of the past, and quotes Beard on the “haunting idea” that woman in the past was “a being always and everywhere subject to a *male* man or as a ghostly creature too shadowy to be even that real”. This use of language is informative, with ‘haunting’ and ‘ghostly’ hinting at a kind of spectral marginalisation that requires the language of the Gothic to be articulated. The ambiguous ending of *The Awakening* is relevant here, as in the quotation I mentioned above: ‘I suspect she [Florence] wasn’t altogether well herself. You know, I read a study

last term; ladies' minds often can't cope with further education' (Murphy 2011: 01:40). This nod to the assumed chauvinist attitudes towards women's education in the 1920s is slyly paralleled with Florence striding past him—potentially a ghost, potentially alive and ignored—and out into the grounds, where Robert announces, 'I know you're there,' and Florence replies, 'That's more than your headmaster does' (Murphy 2011: 01:40). Significantly, as in Beard's image of the haunting woman, whether Florence is alive or dead, she is invisible to the dominant male narrative that marginalises her, that literally seeks to *ghost* her by insisting that her academic successes resulted in psychological instability. *The Awakening* wears its feminist politics lightly, but gestures towards the problematic status of women in the past and in historical narrative.

However, with this analysis in mind, my arguments do not follow Wallace directly in addressing the marginalisation specifically of women from historical narrative, nor in exploring the capacity of the Gothic—and of haunting, ghosts, and spectrality—to imaginatively redress that gendered imbalance, although the complex position of Florence Cathcart is indicative of the *potential* for the neo-historical aesthetic to do this.<sup>5</sup> I take Wallace's analysis as axiomatic, and then consider how (with this implicit base of women's marginalisation in mind) haunting and spectrality might also be metaphors for the general problematic of historical narrative: not only the explicit exclusion of women, but more broadly the potential for *any* and *all* exclusions. Haunting becomes, in this analysis, an apt metaphor for ways in which the limitations of historical narrative might be transcended in any context; my focus is on the post-postmodern, but with an awareness that this participates in a longstanding and ongoing structure of historically haunted narrative. Inevitable ghostly figures surround any historical text, highlighting a range of voices that that particular narrative has failed to include.

This is why that opening to *The Awakening* is so relevant. It asserts the legitimacy of Florence Cathcart's story and status, by quoting her (fictional) book in the opening; it gives us a historical context for the hauntings to come. Then it immediately debunks a séance, reminding us of the implausibility of narratives of haunting, forcing an alertness to the inevitable limitations of this supposedly 'legitimate' narrative about the past. Throughout the film's twists and turns, with unmaskings and revelations paralleled with the underlying 'real/not-real' haunting, the viewer is persistently pushed into and out of plausibility, recognising the historical setting and context as generally convincing—especially with the emphasis on trauma as a consequence of the war—but disrupting our historical narrative with haunting instead. While the hauntings in the texts I have covered



thus far in this chapter are not generally explicitly anachronistic, I will now go on to discuss some ways in which anachronisms can appear haunted even in texts that are not explicitly ghost stories. The quotation from *The Awakening*—“These boys need to be strong. Stronger than us”—and its proleptically ironic reference to the forthcoming Second World War offers a useful way in to this discussion. The reference is unclear to the characters, who would theoretically just assume that the teacher, Malcolm McNair, is suggesting that young men need to be stronger to avoid the traumas that were suffered by his generation in the First World War, but viewers are conscious that many of ‘these boys’ would go on to fight in the Second World War. These are anachronistic proleptic ironies that I will argue are part of a neo-historical ‘haunting’ of language in these narratives.

### **Haunted trace meanings in the neo-historical aesthetic: Anachronistic language and the New Sincerity**

Throughout my analysis of haunting in the neo-historical aesthetic, I have followed Jacques Derrida and Wendy Brown in emphasising that haunting is as much about the future as the past, about anticipation of the forthcoming spectre, and about the way any anticipation of the future inevitably haunts the present. There is another kind of future that haunts the neo-historical aesthetic and its anachronisms, which I will now go on to discuss. Wolfgang Funk (2013: 152) uses Derrida and Wolfreys to comment: ‘Any text is, in other words, always necessarily haunted by spectres; in literary and cultural theory, these hauntings are usually described as autobiographical, intertextual or contextual influences’. Funk identifies that narrative is haunted by the circumstances of its production. However, beyond this, I would also emphasise that post-Derridean text/narrative is *all* haunted by *us*, as writers and readers, and this is the problem to which the neo-historical aesthetic responds, through its troubled and haunted anachronisms.

Derrida (1981: 26) writes:

Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. [...] Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.

Derrida identifies the logic of the traces, in which the ‘sign’—or word—represents an object that is not literally present within the sign itself; when we use a word to describe something, we do not literally conjure it up, it is not literally present, but it is present as a

trace, produced by our reference to it in language. This is why it is neither straightforwardly present nor absent (neither/nor thus becomes a useful linguistic tool again). Elsewhere, Derrida (2001: 44) reads this trace as explicitly spectral: 'The spectral is neither alive nor dead, neither present nor absent, so in a certain way every trace is spectral'. Derrida thus reads this process of representation as a spectral one, with words standing in for absent, represented objects, which are thus spectrally brought into presence by the words used to describe them. In a neo-historical anachronism there is, in some ways, more than one represented 'object', and thus more than one spectral presence within each one. This is one way in which the present day becomes spectrally visible in the neo-historical setting.

At any given moment, a neo-historical anachronism is functioning on two levels—that of the narrative, and that of the reader's extra-narrative awareness of history. Thus when McNair states that 'these boys' need to be 'stronger' than his generation, there is the narrative context in which this functions—a justification for his brutality and an expression of his trauma—but also a wider suggestion of the future that twenty-first-century viewers know is coming for that generation of boys: the Second World War. The words have a duality, and as such, two different meanings are brought into palimpsestic spectral presence. McNair is haunted by his own past, by the griefs and losses of the First World War, and this is visible in this quotation. However, his words are also haunted by the characters' futures. Even beyond this, because this knowledge of the forthcoming war does not exist within the text, McNair's words are also haunted by *us*, the viewers, in our present-day, knowing interpretations of the characters' futures, and our pasts.

This is similar to the anachronisms I have discussed in previous chapters, such as the anachronism of the underground railroad, which reveals that Colson Whitehead is doing post-postmodern neo-historical history through fiction. The railroad is also an essential narrative device in the text, transporting characters to different states and thus to different circumstances; it makes sense in the strange, anachronism-filled nineteenth century that Whitehead has created. His nineteenth-century is thus haunted by the visible traces of different temporal moments, including the present day in seeing the gaps and lines between them. These levels of interpretation are essential to how neo-historical anachronisms work. Similarly, when Sarah Waters playfully uses the word 'queer' in many of her neo-historical novels, this anachronism participates in a similar kind of doubleness. It is certainly not a 'single-entendre principle', a phrase David Foster Wallace used when

he expounded his proposal for a movement forward from postmodern irony into the post-postmodern 'New Sincerity'.

These double entendres—and the way in which we might read them as indirectly containing Derridean anachronistic spectrality and trace meaning—situate these texts within a trajectory of postmodern and post-postmodern thought. In identifying irony as a persistent postmodern device, David Foster Wallace sought to mobilise this New Sincerity resistance. He argued that 'irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective', but that 'at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in US culture' (Wallace 1998: 49). Irony, he argued, was 'critical and destructive, a ground-clearing. [...] But irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks' (Wallace 1998: 67). This, he suggested, was why a New Sincerity was needed. In a turn not dissimilar to the post-postmodern trajectory of the neo-historical aesthetic, both incorporating and rejecting postmodernism, however, Warren Buckland (2012: 2; original emphasis) writes:

The *new* of new sincerity signifies it as a response to postmodern irony and nihilism: not a rejection of it, not a nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity. Instead, in a dialectical move, new sincerity *incorporates* postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony.

This is not quite David Foster Wallace's original conception of the New Sincerity, but as several critics have pointed out, in its actual manifestations, the New Sincerity became something quite different from its first incarnation in Wallace's essay. As Adam Kelly (2013: 54) puts it, New Sincerity authors and creators such as Michael Chabon, Jennifer Egan, and, interestingly, Colson Whitehead, have developed 'a more complex relation to ironic strategies than the straightforward return to sincerity that Wallace's concluding declaration appears to suggest'. The shared 'newness' of the *New* Sincerity and the *neo*-historical aesthetic (and like *neoliberalism*) is indicative, as Buckland says, not of a total rejection of postmodernism, but a position in relation to it. Unlike the New Sincerity, though, the neo-historical does return to a period before postmodernism *as well*, in its insistence on the reliability of narrative. What is evident about these two concurrent post-postmodern movements is that, where Wallace sought a resistance to the ironic doubleness of postmodernism, this ironic doubling of meaning is present in both the neo-historical aesthetic and the actual functioning of the New Sincerity.

In Waters, however, 'queer' *is* definitively double (at least) in its meaning, a knowing double entendre, and the neo-historical aesthetic *incorporates* this ironic, postmodern

doubleness rather than rejecting it. This is where we can see neo-historical anachronisms as haunted by the present, with our own spectral interpretations always there, insisting on the present-day contexts to these texts, as well as their representations of pasts. As Jeremy Tambling (2010: 1) defines it: 'Anachrony starts with [...] a double perception of time', and my analysis of 'queer' in Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* will demonstrate how neo-historical double entendres in anachronistic language enable this past/present double perception of time.

*Tipping the Velvet* is Waters's first novel, a Bildungsroman of lesbian self-discovery in which first-person narrator Nancy travels through Waters's imagined nineteenth-century London, and its theatrical, political, and lesbian subcultures. Throughout the novel, Nancy uses the word 'queer' with its nineteenth-century meaning. When she describes a theatre audience as 'all queerly lit by the glow of the footlights' (Waters 1998: 9), the word means 'strangely' or 'surprisingly'—as it did in the nineteenth century. Nancy is also aware that people think her 'particular passion for [Kitty is] only queer or quaint' (Waters 1998: 22). By paralleling 'queer' and 'quaint', Waters emphasises two temporally distant meanings of 'queer', i.e. the 'particular passion' is queer in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century sense: Nancy (a woman) loves another woman. Nancy's family also think this 'passion' is strange and 'quaint', queer in the nineteenth-century sense of eccentric or unusual. Thus, the word is used both anachronistically and accurately: a double entendre and a 'double perception of time', with the nineteenth-century meaning shadowed by a trace haunting of the twenty-first-century one. This is where it is neo-historical.

However, as an anachronism, 'queer' is also significantly different from the *Life Mask* and *The Underground Railroad* examples, in that 'queer' existed within the setting culture as well as the moment of writing, whereas there is no evidence of 'weapons of mass destruction' being used before the mid-twentieth century (Carus 2012), and there was not actually a mass underground railway across the US in the nineteenth century. I am not the first to analyse Waters's use of 'queer'. Jerome de Groot (2013: 62) says of 'queer' that 'It most obviously connotes authenticity, being a word that is diegetically, contemporaneously, correct'. He uses 'correct', along with 'authenticity'—with both of the terms' implicit value judgements—to mean what I would define as 'accurate', not 'authentic'. However, the overall point remains, that it is 'correct'/accurate to use 'queer' in a nineteenth-century setting. One of the first recorded uses of the term to refer to someone with same-sex desires was in 1894 (Foldy 1997: 22), around the same time that *Tipping the Velvet* is set. Despite this, it is evident in the novel that the application of the

term to describe sexuality is completely unknown to Nancy. She does not use ‘queer’ intentionally to refer to sexuality, and the ‘queer or quaint’ example, among others, implies her innocence of the term’s multiple meanings. It is a multi-layered and oft-repeated anachronism:<sup>6</sup> ‘I understood my wildness of the past seven days. I thought, how queer it is!—and yet, how very ordinary: *I am in love with you*’ (Waters 1998: 33; original emphasis). ‘Queer’ is next to and played off against ‘ordinary’ as its antonym, implying that Nancy does not understand it to mean anything other than ‘not-ordinary’. Her sentence construction assumes that queerness and ordinariness are mutually incompatible, but, at the same time, she contradicts this, and insists that it is ‘very ordinary’. She thereby inescapably but inadvertently draws attention to the trace, haunting presence of ‘queer’ in the contemporary sense.

While ‘queer’ is not straightforwardly an anachronism, then, unlike ‘weapons of mass destruction’, Waters’s use of the word is still knowingly anachronistic. De Groot (2016: 108) writes:

This self-consciousness, an interrogation of historicity imbibed via gender theory and the last vestiges of the aesthetics of postmodernism, enables the articulation of a dissident sensibility at the same time that her work cleaves to authenticity, realist tropes, and the modes of a form long thought conservative.

As I noted above, and in chapter one, de Groot and I read authenticity differently, but his emphasis on the ‘last vestiges of the aesthetics of postmodernism’ is an interpretation of Waters’s work in which a dying postmodernism enables her to critique the narrative historicity of her fictional works. This contrasts my own analysis, in which it is the *ongoing* presence of postmodernism that playfully marks Waters’s post-postmodern fictional process of doing history, wherein ‘queer’ comes to be both dissident—as de Groot says—and coherently realist. De Groot does, importantly and helpfully, acknowledge the contradictions at play, and in this respect, his argument coheres with my own. Like *Life Mask*, Waters’s novel—as is visible in her anachronistic use of ‘queer’—invents a history that does not attempt to hide the unavoidable traces of present-day influence upon its construction, but exposes and, tongue-firmly-in-cheek, revels in its doubling possibilities. It inhabits the imaginative space that I have shown is at play in the neo-historical aesthetic.

Buse and Stott (1999: 17) write, on Derrida’s (2006: 87; original emphasis) sense that History/traditional history depends upon the ‘the *successive* linking of presents’:

This successive linking of presents is the time, or the theory of time, on which historiography depends. Such a time does not make room for ghosts, is on the

contrary threatened by anything spectral, or, in the technical vocabulary of the historian, anachronistic.

Here, Buse and Stott (1999: 17; original emphasis) make spectrality and anachronisms synonymous, questioning ‘can we rethink anachronism in terms other than simply *error*?’ In responding to Derrida, they highlight the spectral and anachronistic work in which I argue the neo-historical aesthetic is engaged. ‘Queer’ and its haunted multi-temporal status, inflected by trace spectral meanings from the present day *and* the past, rethinks anachronisms as politically charged, with the potential to undermine traditional narrative histories, opening up new imaginative spaces for *spectral*/histories. It resists a chronological *successive* linking of moments—more on this below—and instead suggests a coexistence of times, both spectrally visible in the same word.

In this sense, the purpose and functionality of neo-historical anachronisms is much more substantial than de Groot’s (2013: 62) description of Waters’s ‘queer’ as a ‘minor wink to the reader’—although it is certainly a ‘wink’ in the sense of a knowing hint of shared collusion between author/narrator and reader. Diana Wallace (2013: 163) writes usefully on Waters’s use of ‘queer’, agreeing with its present-day influence in the text, and arguing that Waters’s ‘historical novels use the Gothic to play knowing games with the shifting meanings of the word “queer”, nudging the modern reader into an acknowledgement of the complexities of historical process’. ‘Nudging’ is perhaps a more helpful word than ‘wink’ in that it emphasises the emphatic *presence* of the present day in ‘queer’, but also hints at the playfulness and knowingness within it. Wallace adds: ‘As a particularly self-reflexive form of fantasy, her novels not only use history to play out *our* fears and desires (not those of the Victorians or the 1940s), but also draw our attention to that play, through the use of Gothic conventions and the word “queer”’ (Wallace 2013: 167; original emphasis). It is central—as I discussed in my last chapter—to Waters’s project that readers can observe and understand the presence of the present in her texts and that, as Wallace says, our attention is drawn to these anachronisms. In the texts’ openness about the present-day influence upon them, we see the neo-historical aesthetic, problematising and explicitly embracing flawed historical narrative, and combining a kind of new realism with scepticism through their haunted uses of language. This is how they rethink anachronisms as something other than errors, by allowing the spectral multiple meanings of these words to coexist. Because this is an openly fictionalised version of history that is still a coherent narrative, *Tipping the Velvet* (and others) incorporates and responds to postmodernism by redefining what historical narrative is and can be in the

twenty-first century. After *Specters of Marx*, spectrality becomes an inescapable part of these responses, even in those texts that do not explicitly contain ghosts. Having established this doubleness of haunting trace language, I will now consider how it relies on this idea of ‘knowingness’, on being recognised by the critically engaged reader, who is therefore spectrally present within the text itself.

### **Knowingness in the neo-historical aesthetic**

That ‘wink’ or ‘nudge’, not in de Groot’s sense of the ‘minor’ suggestion, but as indicative of collusion between author/narrator and reader, is also central to my definition of the neo-historical aesthetic. As I suggested above, in relation to *Tipping the Velvet*, anachronisms rely on this collusion between author and reader, to recognise this double perception of time, for the nudge of the present and thus the textual response to postmodernism to be evident. As Mantel (2017a) puts it:

[...] some readers are deeply suspicious of historical fiction. They say that by its nature it’s misleading. But I argue that a reader knows the nature of the contract. When you choose a novel to tell you about the past, you are putting in brackets the historical accounts—which may or may not agree with each other—and actively requesting a subjective interpretation.

The idea that there is a contract between author and reader, in which the ‘so-called facts of history’ are put into ‘brackets’ to allow the novel to exist in its own right, independent of History and history, is true of all historical fiction of course, but in the neo-historical aesthetic the knowingness of the double entendres make this explicit. Mantel’s comments are problematised by recent responses to her work; a 2017 article in *The Guardian* was headlined ‘Students take Hilary Mantel’s Tudor novels as fact, says historian’, and expressed a concern that Mantel’s novels were being treated by history applicants to the University of Cambridge as ‘historically accurate’. ‘It is a novel’, historian John Guy is quoted as saying, ‘It is just silly’ (Brown 2017). Guy is describing students’ overinvestment in Mantel as ‘silly’, suggesting that they should have known the nature of their contract with this fictional text. He also describes the novel as ‘genius’, and is committed to it as a fictional text, but is fundamentally dismissive of those who do not understand that because ‘it is a novel’, it cannot be treated ‘as fact’. Perhaps, then, not all readers are attuned to this ‘contract’ between writer and reader, and to the knowing nods through which Mantel makes the contract present in the text.

One way in which she does this is through the careful use of proleptic irony—which I mentioned above in relation to the haunting presence of the future and present in *The Awakening*. This is used as yet another kind of anachronism in the text, one through which a shared knowledge between author and reader that the characters lack is made apparent, and through which the characters' futures, and our present, appear as trace hauntings in the text. So, for example, Cardinal Wolsey's 'mind becomes clouded, he talks about prophecies, and about the downfall of the priests of England, which he says is foretold, and will now happen' (Mantel 2010: 186). We, as readers, know that this is, in some sense, true: the Catholic priests and monks will soon be deposed. This knowledge anachronistically gestures towards the characters' futures as we—and Mantel—know them to be. There are many such instances of proleptic irony. Anne Boleyn, for example, naively dismisses Jane Seymour: 'Pasty-face? Gone down to Wiltshire. Her best move would be to follow the sister-in-law into a nunnery. Her sister Lizzie married well, but no one wants Milksop, and now no one will' (Mantel 2010: 297). This proleptically anticipates the narrative of the second novel in the trilogy—*Bring Up the Bodies*—in which it becomes very evident that someone—Henry—does, in fact, want 'Milksop' Jane Seymour, and that this will lead to Anne's downfall and, ultimately, her execution.

John Frow, quoted in Nicola Parsons and Kate Mitchell (2013: 13), writes that 'the time of textuality is not the linear, before-and-after, cause-and-effect time embedded in the logic of the archive but the time of a continuous analeptic and proleptic shaping'. This textual time is integral to the neo-historical aesthetic and the method through which it does its fictionalised history; this is how it resists the sense that it is historiography in the form of 'the *successive* linking of presents'. We as readers *know* that these narratives cannot portray straightforwardly accurate historical facts, but that when history is only accessible through narrative, we need to find new ways of understanding the past. *Wolf Hall* is conspicuously written in the present tense. Rather than history as a successive linking of presents, the novel creates one continuous present. Rosario Arias (2014: 28) writes: 'It is true that *Wolf Hall* is rooted in sixteenth-century London day-to-day life, with a vivid language that does not incorporate archaisms, but sounds very credible, narrated as it is in the present tense'. We see again (as in chapter one) Mantel's use of the kinds of credible anachronisms that make the text accessible to a contemporary reader, and which are emphatically different from the glaring impact of phrases such as 'weapons of mass destruction'. Much more striking, though, is Arias's sense that it is the *present tense* of the novel that brings credibility. Mantel (2010: end matter 5) herself similarly writes:



The Tudors are the great national soap opera; their story has been worked over so extensively that we see it as having a kind of inevitable, predetermined quality about it, so I needed to find a way of telling the story that would create an immediacy of viewpoint and cancel out the preconceptions we were brought up with. The present tense forbids hindsight and propels us forward through this world, making it new, just as it was, in every unfolding moment, for the players.

Mantel's view of the power of the present tense suggests that it is this that brings suspense into the narrative about the Tudors. This is a surprising although not unconvincing argument. However, her insistence that the novel seeks to undermine, to 'cancel out' the 'inevitable, predetermined quality' suggests that she wants to remove the haunting presence of characters' futures from the text itself—and thereby remove our haunting presence as the interpreters who are aware of this proleptic shaping. This argument is undermined by the proleptic ironies that permeate the text. The neo-historical aesthetic—persistently aware of our own, post-postmodern temporal position—shines through in these ironies, suggesting an entirely new, much more self-aware, way of doing history.

This differs, again, from historiographic metafiction, which, while emphatically aware of their own problematic position in relation to history, sometimes still invest in the chronological linking of successive presents. Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1995), for example, includes numerous examples of the 'historical personages' that Hutcheon (1988: 89) sees as key features of the genre, including Karl Marx and, more obscurely, Dan Leno himself—a celebrated late-nineteenth-century music hall performer. Different characters narrate at different times, but it is the third person, omniscient narrator whose presence is the most historiographically metafictional, insisting upon the futures that await the various characters—and particularly those recognisable historical personages whose 'true' histories *are* known. So for example George Gissing, another 'historical personage', goes to visit Charles Babbage's 'Analytical Engine': 'This was in many respects the forerunner of the modern computer', our narrator informs us (Ackroyd 2017: 107). This is one of many such examples, and is clearly not the hinting (or nudging) of proleptic irony and anachronisms, in which the characters' futures come to be in some ways coexistent with their presents through the reader's knowing engagement with hints and haunting anticipations. This is instead an insistence upon the long-distant future to these pasts, asserting the coherence of chronological history, even with a concurrent and contradictory awareness of its unknowability. *Dan Leno* explores and narrates the circumstances of various historically marginalised London underclasses, including in

relation to the Analytical Engine, dramatising marginalised pasts. But its third-person narrator also asserts a present-day position, omnisciently asserting the known future. The narrator's explicit statements of the 'future' create a kind of teleological narrative, in which history's end—the present day—is already known.

This is, then, a far cry from the strange, haunting, anachronic linking of these proleptic ironies in *Wolf Hall*, or *The Awakening*, or *Dark Matter*, also set interwar. In *Dark Matter* (2010: 74, 8), one character 'blather[s] on about Mr Hitler needing a jolly good thrashing', and the funding for the expedition comes from the War Office because 'They seem to think our data will be of use if—well, if there's another war'. With these events taking place in 1937, the future looms heavily, including in that hesitant 'if—well, if', which is equally haunted by the relatively recent past of the 'other' war. However, the future is still uncertain from the characters' perspectives. They are haunted, instead, by our readerly knowledge of what is to follow for them, which is quite different from the conclusive statements about the future 'modern computer'. Buse and Stott (1999: 14) note ghosts' and haunting's potential for resisting these kinds of teleologies:

Ghosts are a problem for historicism precisely because they disrupt our sense of a linear teleology in which the consecutive movement of history passes untroubled through the generations. Again we return to the question of anachronism because ghosts are anachronism *par excellence*, the appearance of something in a time in which they clearly do not belong.

This gives a stronger sense both of how neo-historical ghosts work in general—perhaps locating a way out of some of the more troubling teleologies that can come with imposing the present onto the past—but also how these specific proleptic ironies work differently to the historically located statements of historiographic metafiction. Instead of insisting upon chronological linkings of past to future, here, futures appear in the characters' presents; the Second World War subtly and non-chronologically emerges to haunt Jack's 1937 in our readerly knowledge. Hutcheon (1988: 90) writes that instead of a 'lack of concern for history', historiographic metafiction has 'a view of the past, both recent and remote, that takes the present powers and limitations of the writing of that past into account. And the result is often a certain avowed provisionality and irony'. It is clearly true that all of these texts do acknowledge the limitations of writing about the past; *Dan Leno's* shifting of narrative perspective, and dramatic narrative twists and turns, play on readerly assumptions when reading a text set in the past. However, this provisionality that Hutcheon reads in historiographic metafiction has been extended and complicated by the

more hauntingly integral proleptic ironies of the neo-historical aesthetic. As ever, I am not suggesting that there has been a sharp break between historiographic metafiction and the neo-historical aesthetic; I rather suggest that certain developing differences in twenty-first-century literature might be articulated as uniquely ‘neo-historical’.

### **Conclusion: Non-linear histories and the ethics of haunting**

As I demonstrated above, *The Others* provides a striking analogy for the ways in which the future haunts the past in these texts. With the twist at the end of the film, we learn that the characters we have been watching are, in fact, ghosts. The hauntings they have experienced have not been incursions from the past, as we, and they, had assumed. Instead, Grace and the children are the past, which is anachronistically lingering in the present. As such, the ‘living’ characters—Victor and his family—become the present/future (unclear) that has been haunting the past: this is a telling analogy for the neo-historical anachronistic and trace hauntings from us/the future. As Mrs Mills puts it in the quotation I have taken for the title of this chapter, subtly alerting Grace to her achronological amnesia about her own past: ‘we must all learn to live together, the living and the dead’ (Amenábar 2001: 01:28). In a post-postmodernist turn, Mrs Mills, a ghost, resists the idea of linear chronology, offering a radical coexistence of past and present: the living and the dead must learn to live *together*. Or, as María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013b: 33) write: ‘What is at stake, ultimately, is the specter as a figure of absolute alterity (existing both outside and within us) that should, as emphasized in *Specters of Marx*, not be assimilated or negated (exorcized) but lived *with*, in an open, welcoming relationality’. We must all learn to live together, then, the living with the dead.

However, this is not to mistakenly insist that the haunting presence of the present day in these texts makes the past and present the same, nor does it erase differences between the living and the dead. Nor does it insist upon living/dead or present/past as binarised opposites. Indeed, it is fundamental to neo-historical hauntings that the spectre offers a combination of living/dead—it is both and it is neither—just as Derrida suggested in the spaces of the real/not real. By its very nature, historical fiction also resists these simplistic binaries, as Diana Wallace (2013: 3) says: ‘the historical novel as a genre appears oxymoronic in its yoking of supposedly antithetical opposites—“fact” and “fiction”, “history” and “literature”, the new (“novel”) and the old (“history”)’. Wallace (2013: 3-4) adds that ‘the Gothic historical novel is even more problematic. With its associations with the supernatural, the Gothic is even more at odds with our notion of history than the

realist novel which at least appears to represent the “real”. Thus, following Wallace’s argument on female Gothic histories, we see how, in some respects, haunting is an appropriate form for the neo-historical aesthetic. Rather than a return to realism as its commitment to narrative form might imply, it actually enables the bringing together of apparent opposites in a structure that not only allows for, but also *embraces* such antithetical possibilities. As Buse and Stott (1999: 10-11) write:

Ghosts are neither dead nor alive, neither corporeal objects nor stern absences. As such, they are the stock-in-trade of the Derridean enterprise, standing in defiance of binary oppositions such as presence and absence, body and spirit, past and present, life and death. [...] each can be shown to possess an element or trace of the term that it is meant to oppose. In the figure of the ghost, we see that past and present cannot be neatly separated from one another, as any idea of the present is always constituted through the difference and deferral of the past, as well as anticipations of the future.

Haunted text can therefore offer the anachronistic non-chronological capacity that is required by postmodern deconstructions of historical narrative and simultaneous attachment *to* narrative. It resists dichotomisation, just as the neo-historical aesthetic does, instead combining apparently completely oppositional perspectives as haunted trace presences: the past appears as a trace within the present and future, and vice versa.

In this concluding section of the chapter, I wish to discuss how haunting’s resistance to binarised oppositions, and its insistent non-linearity—whether in the form of literal ghosts or haunted language—might offer a different ethical and political dimension to the neo-historical aesthetic. Del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (2013b: 34) position the ghost as a figure of alterity, and they also suggest that it ‘should remain at least partially inscrutable to ensure respect for otherness’. This offers a very productive route to understanding neo-historical ghosts and the capaciousness of the neo-historical aesthetic. Its breadth of possibility has thus far been generally unrealised in neo-historical texts, with a few exceptions. One such exception might be the literal ghost of *Dark Matter*, whose strategic inscrutability makes him the opposite, almost, of Waters’s emphatically interpretable tropes, but which leads him to become a cipher for a whole range of potential hauntings (although the novel is no less accessible for that). The ghost could, for example, be the proleptic foreshadowing of the forthcoming war, in which grotesque violences will be performed. He was tortured and murdered by a group of men: ‘Men like that—when they know they won’t be found out—they will do anything’ (Paver 2010: 203). With that

interpretation in mind, however, Jack also learns that the man, when alive, was abjectly poor and marginalised, and as such the ghost comes to be linked to Jack's class anxiety, which is frequently manifested in Jack's concerns about being poor, about not speaking in the vernacular of the aristocrats on his team, and not sharing their cultural capital (e.g. Paver 2010: 7, 35). The ghost, then, is also, simultaneously, the haunting ghost of Jack's sense of class injustice and his own feelings of inadequacy. Or/and, he is the ghost of Jack's confused and unrealised sexuality. Or/and, as Lucie Armitt (2016) has posited, he represents the threats to the Arctic that are posed by climate change—a truly anachronistic haunting from the anticipated future, both our current present, i.e. the future of the novel, and *our* anticipated future. Because Jack's ghost is extra-linguistic, inchoate in some sense, he offers a breadth of possible interpretations. He is *other* in an impossibly undecipherable way. In this respect, *Dark Matter's* haunting offers a potentially more ethical neo-historical version of the past, one that does not, necessarily, speak *for* the past, but instead imagines a past in which the inaccessible and troubled elements of history can be imagined and acknowledged. The ghost is emphatically *other*, and this offers a certain (metaphorical) capacity for openness to historical difference, to the impossibility of understanding experience in the past. This is not to undermine the neo-historical aesthetic's self-aware and freely acknowledged imaginings of those pasts, but rather to suggest haunted text as a *potential* space for a more inchoate but still readable and accessible (i.e. not historiographically metafictional) version of those pasts.

Pamela Thurschwell (2009: 240) writes of *The Others*, similarly, that it 'gives us a portrait of death as real otherness', playing on the title and emphasising—as I have in relation to *The Awakening*—the lack of resolution in the final haunting: 'The interactions between the dead and the living are never made easy, never tamed. [...] by insisting that they will share a space with the living, [Grace] maintains a grasp on her past and refuses to countenance loss'. Thurschwell suggests that this is indicative of an extended Freudian melancholia, not managed mourning. This, she argues, 'may be the best way of respecting death in its unknowability; she and her children will be proper ghosts from now on—they have become the Others of the title'. Arguing that the ending respects the 'unknowability' of death, works alongside the idea that such otherness respects the unknowability of the past, even as, contradictorily, Grace 'maintains a grasp' on her own, living past, and her ownership of the house. As Mrs Mills says in the closing lines: 'the intruders are leaving. But others will come. And sometimes we'll sense them, but others we won't. But that's just the way it's always been' (Amenábar 2001: 01:37). That the 'intruders' are the *living*,

encroaching upon the dead's ownership of the house, is a reminder of the uncertainties of status, of the ways in which the interactions 'are never made easy, never tamed', and this, too, gives a sense of the neo-historical aesthetic's inchoate potential for a new manifestation of the relationship between past and present.

The non-linearity of haunting has some potential in this respect too. In this chapter, I have discussed the ghost's emergence from the past, its anticipatory effects, or returns from the future (along with numerous other chronologically resistant possibilities), and explained how this relates to the theories of anachronism that I have posed in previous chapters and the explicit proleptic ironies of the neo-historical aesthetic—whether in ghost stories or not. Valerie Rohy and Elizabeth Freeman have both written on the potentiality of non-chronological or anachronistic structures for rethinking obscured queer histories. Rohy (2009: x) radically re-envision the concept of anachronism as a rebellion against both the teleology and the atavism of what she calls 'straight time', which she links to the 'reproductive futurism' that Lee Edelman (2004) sees as at the core of exclusionary heterosexual identities. Rohy plays on that concept of 'straight', to identify the inherent heterosexual logic that is implied by linear chronology, as a consequence of, among other things, the linear logic of descentance implied by reproductivity. Linear chronology is 'the regular, linear, and unidirectional pattern that I will call *straight time*' (Rohy 2009: xiv; original emphasis).

We might also, via Freeman, link these concepts of a controlling and normative 'straight time' to the global imposition of late- and neoliberal capitalism, which I identified as a structural part of post-postmodernity in chapter one. Freeman (2010: xx) identifies—like Diana Wallace, above—the history-with-a-capital H', though she articulates it in a slightly different way to Wallace. She follows Dipesh Chakrabarty in linking it to, in his words, 'the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship, bourgeois public and private [...] the nation state' and, Freeman adds, 'especially the operations and perceived instability of capitalism'. Freeman sees this 'official history' (what she calls 'History 1') as based on the *instability* of capitalism, where, as I argued in chapter one, I see neo-historical resistance to normative history as located in the deeper re-entrenchment of capitalist discourse in the twenty-first century. In this sense, despite their acceptance of radical disruptions to the idea of accessing the 'real' past through narrative, these neo-historical texts are in fact offering a comforting (middlebrow) version of the present, even as it disruptively emerges in the past. Aside from this disagreement in our perspectives on contemporary capitalism as it relates to history, however, Freeman (2010: xii) argues that 'being normatively

“modern” is a matter [...] of occupying an imagined place at the new end of a sequence’. This links to my discussion of the problematic teleologies of historiographic metafiction and its assertion of an overarching linear chronology. Haunting, as in the haunting proleptic ironies that I articulate above, offers a resistance to the sequential logic of chronology, to ‘the *successive* linking of presents’ identified by Derrida. Freeman (2010: 3, 4; original emphasis) identifies this linearity as ‘*chrononormativity*’; she argues that this word succinctly expresses the structures through which the normative teleologies of socially regulated time—‘marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals’—are imposed upon all bodies, queer or otherwise.

Both Freeman and Rohy identify crucial sites of resistance to these logics of ‘straight time’; Rohy (2009: xiv; original emphasis) writes, ‘I use the term *anachronism* to name a range of temporal anomalies, from backwardness to prematurity, regression to anticipation, the “primitive” to future perfect’. She positions such anachronisms as ‘recall[ing] Freud’s and Derrida’s methodological and political attention to undecidability. It reminds us that history is always ahistorical, progress is inextricable from backwardness’ (Rohy 2009: xvi). She thus suggests that a mode of queer history must be anachronic and alert to the value of anachronism, resisting linear chronologies in favour of a non-progressive, anticipatory, backward, but also expansive and inclusive logic. Rohy (2009: xv; original emphasis; quoting Derrida 2006: xix, 6) explicitly uses Derridean spectres to expand the potentiality of her anachronisms:

Anachronism is not merely the necessary other of straight time; it is always inside normative temporality. Noting the ghostly persistence of the past, Derrida writes of ‘a spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time’. But this moment out of time is also, he suggests, the moment of *all* time, for the spectre of the past ‘de-synchronises, it recalls us to anachrony’.

That suggestion that anachronism is *always* within normative temporality is essential, identifying how, as Buse and Stott (1999: 16) put it, ‘chronology must necessarily produce a concept of anachronism to define it and negatively keep it in place’. Even when anachronisms, or queer time, remain entirely unacknowledged, they are always already part of any chronological articulation of straight time. As such, inevitably, so are ghosts and spectres; the moment that does not chronologically belong ‘in time’ *is* a spectral moment. Anachrony *is* spectral. As Freeman (2007: 159; 2010: x) simply puts it, the:

‘sensation of asynchrony can be viewed as a queer phenomenon’ and “‘queer time’ appears haunted’.

This work by Rohy and Freeman on anachronistically spectral responses to the dictatorial and hegemonic imposition of straight chronology might suggest that the neo-historical aesthetic is an inherently queer phenomenon, spectrally and anachronically engaging with the troubled past. However, that is not my argument. Certainly these ghostly and anachronistic features—along with an awareness of the ‘proleptic and analeptic effects inherent in historiography’—suggest that the neo-historical aesthetic can productively be linked to these queer pasts (Rohy 2009: 131). But it would be a misrepresentation of the neo-historical aesthetic to suggest that it has persistently explicitly *responded* to or dealt with queerness and the problematic of queer histories. Some neo-historical texts certainly do, but the neo-historical has not necessarily been manifested as an explicitly radical or queer aesthetic, as I discussed in my previous chapter when I emphasised its middlebrowness. A contemporary changed relationship to the potential functionality of anachronism and spectrality may be the product of queer discourse, but the neo-historical aesthetic does not always engage with or represent a radically queer politics. In that sense, we could read the neo-historical aesthetic as offering comforting narratives, ones which reassure us that the twenty-first century is an improvement on what has gone before, and which ‘solve the problem’ of postmodern historiography.

Waters does neo-historically use the word ‘queer’ to startlingly haunting and anachronistic effect, as I have discussed in this chapter. However, rather than being a radically queer politics, this, as I suggested in relation to the middlebrow, might instead offer us some kind of reassuring sense that our politics are ‘up-to-the-minute’ and are a substantial improvement on the exclusionary politics of the past (Humble 2001: 14). That second chapter also suggested the ways in which Waters’s middlebrowness might be limiting to a queer historiography, with its commitment to narrative coherence and ‘happy’ endings suggesting a restrictively dyadic and conservative structure.

In the conclusion to this chapter on the ghosts of the neo-historical aesthetic, I wish to propose that this post-postmodern response to changing historiographies in the twenty-first century might have queerness as an integral—but as yet unacknowledged—part of it. This is not suggesting what it is already doing, but suggesting that the aesthetic has a wider political potential. In articulating haunted and anachronistic pasts that have the potential to resist teleologies, this currently somewhat conservative form—broadly (although not invariably) tied into linear narrative, with generally conclusive if not always



‘happy’ endings—might be able to work within a wider queer historiography. Rohy (2009: xiv) writes that ‘the artificial temporality of narrative form alerts us to the fictional dimension of chronology as such: after all, time is a trope and anachronism a figure’. This is the practice in which the neo-historical aesthetic is already engaged, with literature functioning as a haunted site, resistant to the dictates of historical chronology. However, it is also possible that the neo-historical aesthetic has the potential to expand beyond this.

Ultimately, ghosts in the neo-historical aesthetic reveal the radically anachronic practices in which the aesthetic is already engaged, suggesting the anachronistically haunting presence of the present day in any narrative of the past, in proleptic ironies and a subtle but distinct ordering of textuality and haunted interpretation. The non-linear logic of haunting allows the neo-historical aesthetic to function, to pull together the two temporal moments of postmodernism and pre-postmodernism, into an uneasily haunted but functional spectral anachrony. However, ghosts also allow us to see the wider queer potential of these neo-historical anachronisms.

In the next chapter, I will build on the contemporary themes identified by these neo-historical ghosts. Wendy Brown (2001: 142) writes of the haunted nature of the twenty-first-century relationship to its own present:

Ours is a present that is hurtled into the future without regard for human attachments, needs, or capacities. A present that dishonours the past by erasing it with unprecedented speed and indifference. A present that equates the recent past with the anachronistic [...] A present whose inevitable and rapid eclipse is uppermost in the political consciousness of its inhabitants.

The next chapter will engage with these anxieties about the rapid developments in contemporary environments, with an analysis of the neo-historical aesthetic in relation to technology. Examining steampunk novels as participants in an extreme version of the neo-historical aesthetic, I will explore how rapid technological developments in the twenty-first century have come to ‘equate the recent past with the anachronistic’, and, as Buse and Stott (1999: 17) put it, to make *us* feel like anachronisms if we ‘find ourselves unable to come to terms with the latest technology’. The anxiety that Buse and Stott articulate, even as they value and valorise the concept of anachronism, speaks to the way in which steampunk texts process and conservatively re-stabilise a relationship to technology. Brown’s sense that *we* in the present are about to be eclipsed, erased—and thus spectralised—by an imminently developing future is manifested in steampunk’s profound *re*-embodiment of both characters and technology, encouraging reconnection

with the physical world and, perhaps conservatively, with the non-spectralised body. Steampunk thus offers a dramatically counter-spectral narrative, responding to such fears of spectralisation through technology and narrative by insisting on the solidity of physical experience.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren's *The Spectralities Reader* (2013a) is perhaps the best indication of this new critical comfort with spectres, as it covers a huge range of different theoretical and critical assessments of spectrality including and since *Specters of Marx* in 1993. With different headings such as 'Spectropolitics: Ghosts of the Global Contemporary', 'Haunted Historiographies', and 'The Ghost in the Machine: Spectral Media', the *Reader* emphasises the range of different discourses in which spectrality has come to be used as a methodology and a critical tool, from literary criticism, to economics, to geography and beyond.

<sup>2</sup> In my discussions of interpretation, I am aware that reading and viewing experiences are not identical. However, in terms of the spectralisation at play in reading/viewing these historically-set texts, I will be treating their interpretive actions as broadly interchangeable. Some specificities to this are highlighted by Pamela Thurschwell (2009: 238), when she comments on the ghostliness of the images on screen:

When we watch a film, on some level of course, we know, even as we disavow that knowledge, that everyone on the screen is really simply a flickering two dimensional image, but for the space of the film, the ghosts share the material reality of the living. The dead are with us again; the past can be reassuringly restored.

Derrida also identifies an anxious relationship to the spectrality of contemporary technology, and television viewing in particular, which is relevant to my analysis in the next chapter (quoted in Wolfreys 2002: 1).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Boxall (2013: 65) writes of this that the ending is 'perhaps not true, within the terms of the novel's own realism [...] in a close reprise of Fowles's shocking gesture in 1969'.

<sup>4</sup> We might also think here of the end of *The Awakening*. It is not made clear whether protagonist Florence, who we see walking the corridors of the school, survived an attempt to poison her, or is now a ghost. 'I'm thinking of writing another book: *The Interpretation of Ghosts*', she says (Murphy 2011: 01:41). This title could mean the book will be about the process of interpreting ghosts, or it could be interpretation *by* ghosts—by Florence

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herself, or by the other ghosts she has met. As this is never made clear, there is a sense in which the title means both.

- <sup>5</sup> There is also potential for an analysis of Grace in *The Others* as the classic figure of a Gothic hysterical woman, transposed into a mid-twentieth-century setting. This could be interpreted as a portrayal of a woman in Gothic history (notably written and directed by a man, as is *The Awakening*) that resists the potential for the neo-historical aesthetic to produce recuperative histories, and demonstrating instead its potential to re-inscribe marginalising and reductive discourses from the past.
- <sup>6</sup> De Groot (2013: 62-63) also notes that 'queer' appears forty-three times in *Tipping the Velvet*, 'which in itself is quite a substantial incidence for a term rarely heard in contemporary speech'. I am inclined to query the assumption of infrequent usage in everyday conversation as being, at the very least, dependent on demographic, but, even with this in mind, the frequency of 'queer' in the historically-set text is still striking.

## **Chapter four**

### **‘Clockwork always rings alarm bells’: The reactionary, anti-spectral embodiment of steampunk technology**

I do not know about that, my lady. I mean to say, one’s life is one thing; one’s technology is an entirely different matter.

Gail Carriger, *Changeless* (2010a: 208)

In Gail Carriger’s *Changeless*, the second novel in her *Parasol Protectorate* series,<sup>1</sup> this statement emphasises the value that characters place on technology; someone’s life, it appears, is not worth quite as much as their technology. The pronouncement is made by Madame Lefoux, an inventor and a friend to the novels’ protagonist, Alexia Maccon (Tarabotti before her marriage). Given that Madame Lefoux is an inventor in a steampunk narrative (and an inventor appears to be a requirement in any steampunk text),<sup>2</sup> her technophilia is hardly surprising. She designs and creates technology herself (to devastating effect in the fourth book in the series, Carriger 2011), and thus it is perhaps predictable that she would feel this passionate about it. This love of technology is not unique to Madame Lefoux in the series; a fascination with gadgets and machinery is shared by many characters, not least by Alexia herself. Madame Lefoux’s enthusiasm means that she expresses surprise in the quotation above that Lord Akeldama (a vampire and friend of Alexia) trusted his friend with his life, but she is more surprised that he trusted Alexia with his technology. Technology, it is implied, is hugely valuable, and giving others any machinery which belongs to you—as is the case here—should be a cause for very deep consideration. Only the very closest friends can be trusted with one’s technology. Technology is precious.

However, Carriger’s novels are also profoundly tongue-in-cheek. Madame Lefoux’s statement has a conspicuous double meaning; it also means that technology is an entirely different matter to life. The two—life and technology—*can* be separated. In making this clear distinction, Madame Lefoux’s statement claims that the former does not depend upon the latter, that our lives are not dictated by the technology in them—one’s life is ‘an *entirely* different matter’. This articulates a binarised logic about the relationship between humans and technology, which this chapter will argue—via the works of theorists such as Sherry Turkle, Jaron Lanier, and others—is part of a contemporary discourse that seeks to emphatically separate ‘one’s life’ from ‘one’s technology’. Further, and much more

subtly, the distinction between life and technology also casts doubt on the idea that any technology could be considered ‘alive’. This is an important theme in steampunk texts, which contain many proliferations of automatons and variations on artificial intelligence. In the multiple layers to Madame Lefoux’s comment, she raises profound concerns about technology, whilst simultaneously emphasising a genuine love and passion for it. This subtly raises many present-day debates about our relationship to technology, with regard to our love of it, our reliance on it, and our worries about it. These are the issues that much literary steampunk addresses. The steampunk texts that this chapter will examine consistently do *both* of these things; they express enthusiasm and anxiety simultaneously. Steampunk does not offer us a solution to this simultaneity of fear and passion by explaining one or the other away, but suggests the necessity and the means of reconciling the two, and it often does so with a problematically conservative politics of reassurance.

This chapter takes a somewhat different methodological approach from previous chapters, in that it takes a particular neo-historical anachronism—steampunk technology—to look at how it functions within the steampunk development of new and divergent versions of the past. In this technology-as-anachronism case study, I will argue that steampunk’s anachronisms work both similarly and differently to a more restrained neo-historical text, *Sixty Lights* (2004), and demonstrate that steampunk is at the extreme end of the neo-historical aesthetic’s spectrum. It is a participant in the aesthetic but pushes it to new and problematic extents by inventing wildly divergent anachronistic technologies in its nineteenth-century settings. I argue that pushing the neo-historical aesthetic to such extents results in more contradictions, with representations of technology that are sometimes radical and dramatically divergent from the present day, but which are also often inclined towards this conservative resolution of contemporary anxieties. Steampunk, especially in its literary forms, first developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and thus steampunk itself is not essentially post-postmodern, as its styles and ideas are much more longstanding than that. However, this chapter will show firstly that the concerns that are addressed in steampunk texts such as Cherie Priest’s *Boneshaker* (2009), Gail Carriger’s *Soulless* (2009) and *Changeless* (2010), Mark Hodder’s *The Strange Affair of Spring-Heeled Jack* (2010), and Kady Cross’s *The Girl in the Steel Corset* (2011) are related explicitly to the twenty-first-century moment—and its issues with technology. The ways in which the steampunk aesthetic is *currently* being manifested are uniquely twenty-first century.

Twenty-first-century steampunk texts are also connected to my work in the previous chapter, considering Jacques Derrida's theories of spectrality. I established that spectrality is intrinsic to the neo-historical aesthetic. As I quoted, María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013b: 32) write that Derrida's *Specters of Marx* 'is generally considered the main catalyst for the late-twentieth-century surge in explorations of ghosts and haunting', and I have positioned the neo-historical aesthetic as a twenty-first-century participant in this surge, mining the productive space of haunting for its ontological gaps, in order to produce new and haunted histories—neo-histories. I wish to demonstrate that steampunk, as the extreme end of the neo-historical aesthetic, pushes back against this spectralisation with an emphatic *re*-embodying action. These texts place heavy emphasis on the human physical body and its experiences of pleasure or pain, placing it in sharp contrast to the technological bodies of automata—technological bodies about which the novels are profoundly ambivalent. Spectral metaphors are also related to contemporary anxieties about technology—and particularly virtual communications. These are the same anxieties that I will argue steampunk is attempting to process and resolve, so these different incentives for re-embodiment go hand-in-hand. This is why there is such a focus in steampunk on living bodies, whether in sexual or violent contexts, and substantial, emphatically physically-present technologies.

As my epigraph from *Changeless* suggests, relationships to technology in general are ambivalently portrayed in the steampunk texts I will discuss. Technology is sometimes represented as a joy to experience, whether in the velocycles, the dirigibles,<sup>3</sup> or the robotic cat that keeps one character company in her laboratory (in which she, of course, builds steampunk technology). Many steampunk-influenced texts demonstrate the benefits that technology can bring to lives, as with the life-saving transposition of the mind of a person into a robotic body (an emphatic technological re-embodiment) in the second novel in the *Burton and Swinburne* series.<sup>4</sup> Relationships to technology are rarely straightforward in steampunk, though. Even in suggesting the enjoyment, the usefulness, and the benefits of much technology, the texts also explore anxieties around our reliance upon it, and our inability to cope without it. Often steampunk technology is controlled by devious villains, as in *Boneshaker*, *The Girl in the Steel Corset*, or *Soulless*. Sometimes technology becomes the devious villain itself, or the villain becomes technology, as in *The Strange Affair of Spring-Heeled Jack* (and in the classic steampunk text *Perdido Street Station* [2001], which falls outside my remit of texts set in the past—more on this below). With these examples in mind, I will also explore the ways in which steampunk technology is often used as a

conservatively comforting alternative to our anxieties about present-day technology, suggesting that even with technological developments we still remain fundamentally connected to our bodies, and that those bodies are more substantial or meaningful than technological bodies. Steampunk thus offers versions of technology that are far more physically present than anxieties about virtuality suggest. In all of these manifestations, and more, steampunk explores our present-day relationship to our technology, our paranoia about its development, and the possibilities of our future with it.

This chapter will begin with a section that establishes what steampunk actually *is* and how it is manifested in imagined technological inventions. An example from *Boneshaker* reveals what steampunk technology looks like, how it works, and begins to articulate why it is so obviously a cipher for the contemporary moment. The next section extends the analysis of how the implausibility of steampunk technology—the blatant nature of the steampunk anachronism—influences the focus of the texts, demonstrating this as an expansion of the neo-historical anachronism in a discussion of *Sixty Lights* and how its anachronisms are differently plausible to steampunk technology. I consider the present-day relationship to technology with reference to Sherry Turkle's (2011) and Jaron Lanier's (2010) works on communications technologies, analysing how steampunk technology actually offers some reassurance and a negotiation of some concerns about the impact of communications technology on human relationships, and how the scale and weight of steampunk technology can act as a reassuring counterpoint to present-day gadgets. This also relates to the concerns about virtuality and spectralisation that steampunk manages and resists, and this discussion returns to the work of Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, exploring how the anachronistic spectrality they identify is also at the heart of steampunk's concerns about technology. The next section of the chapter demonstrates that steampunk pursues a conservative re-embodiment of people and technology, as a way to resolve these fears of a potentially disembodimenting spectrality; I explore several different ways in which steampunk texts work to emphatically insist upon the bodily presence, not just of the technology, but also of the humans in their narratives. This final section takes these images of bodies and examines how they are related to a very specific anxiety about robotics and artificial intelligence, and suggests the problematic ways in which steampunk's re-embodiment forms a reactionary response to such concerns.

### **Defining steampunk and identifying steampunk technology**

The contested word ‘steampunk’ was first used by K. W. Jeter (quoted in Nevins 2011: 513) to refer to those ‘gonzo-historical’ literary responses to 1980s cyberpunk, such as his own *Morlock Night* (1979), Tim Powers’s *The Anubis Gates* (1983), and James P. Blaylock’s *Homunculus* (1986). These texts are all set in the Victorian period and reinvent history to include various technological devices, as a consequence of time travel, of alien invasion, or of the supernatural. Jeter defines ‘steam-punks’, which he describes as ‘Victorian fantasies’, and his examples show that he exclusively means texts set in the nineteenth century. This definition of steampunk—the product of its increasing prominence at the time—emerged at the same time as early postmodern destabilisations of history as accessed through narrative. For many years, as a consequence of Jeter’s defining statement, steampunk was understood to refer to literary, historical fictional texts, which were exclusively set in the nineteenth century. However, too strict a critical adherence to this has been critiqued in recent years, most notably by Jess Nevins (2011), who draws attention to the fact that critics and theorists of steampunk literature have become polarised into ‘prescriptivists’ and ‘descriptivists’. ‘Prescriptivists’, he argues, continue to focus on the Jeter definition of steampunk as strictly literature set in the Victorian period, rejecting as not steampunk anything that falls outside of this strict remit. ‘Descriptivists’, however, acknowledge the wider range of cultures and cultural products to which ‘steampunk’ has been applied in the twenty-first century, and see steampunk as exploring a wider range of periods than exclusively the Victorian.

Nevins is right. Imposing clearly imaginary, historically-inspired technology onto a whole range of different periods and locations—future, present, alternate universe, and past—steampunk is much more than just ‘Victorian fantasy’.<sup>5</sup> Steampunk is much more than just literary too. Over the past couple of decades, a huge culture has developed around it, most notably with regard to cosplay (steampunk costumes and performance) and DIY. Steampunk conventions attract large numbers of participants, dressed in the style of their favourite steampunk characters, or in a more general Victoriana steampunk style. Often, homemade steampunk inventions are on display and for sale at such events, and there are workshops at which you can make your own steampunk gadgets.<sup>6</sup> This wider culture, and its increased popularity in recent years, is fascinating with regard to the changing twenty-first-century relationship to history and its cultural manifestations. Why do people want to dress in a style that mashes up the nineteenth century with the present day? What does this mean as a manifestation of a certain relationship to the past and its representations? What is the performative potential of such an activity?



However, as I have focused on the literary thus far in the thesis, this analysis will consider how questions such as these are manifested in steampunk literature—why do we seek to be imaginatively immersed in periods that reshape and reinvent the past? What is the political potential or limitations of such literature? And why is it imagining specific kinds of technology *now*? While I agree with Nevins that discussions of steampunk in general are problematically restricted if they focus exclusively on literary works set in the Victorian period, again, because of the wider focus in this thesis, it is in fact most productive for the arguments in this thesis to also read steampunk literature set in the past when considering steampunk's participation in the neo-historical aesthetic.

In 'The Law of Genre', Derrida (1992: 224) argued that 'as soon as the word genre is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn'. This limit then provides a boundary to transgress and the precise conditions that make this transgression possible. While I do not intend to take this to its logical conclusion and deconstruct the concept of genre theory as a whole, it is valuable to acknowledge the limitations of 'genre' for discussing steampunk, and this further emphasises the logic behind a neo-historical *aesthetic*, not a neo-historical genre, since to think in terms of the latter would be unhelpfully exclusionary. The applications of the term 'steampunk' also extend far beyond the exclusively textual, as I have discussed. Mike Perschon (2012) expresses this in relation to steampunk as follows:

When *Soulless* [the first novel in the *Parasol Protectorate* series] was first released, detractors stated it wasn't 'steampunk enough'. Justification was often on the technical end: the book was set in Victorian London, but where was the anachronistic technology, the retro futuristic mechanical innovations? This simplistic approach to determining what was or wasn't Steampunk bothered me, since it seemed an exceedingly narrow understanding [...]

Even aside from the fact that the *Parasol Protectorate* actually does contain a range of entertainingly realised steampunk technology, the debate about whether a text is 'steampunk enough' to be called 'steampunk' is clearly very limited. Instead, Perschon argues, in line with Derrida's argument (in an entirely unacknowledged way), that we should think of a steampunk *aesthetic* that is present in a whole range of texts, sometimes central to the narrative, sometimes a sideline to it, i.e. as I have shown the neo-historical aesthetic to function. Whatever the degree to which the steampunk aesthetic is present in them, the texts analysed in this chapter comment upon the cultural relationship to technology at the moment of their writing, while being set in a version of the past. This

is where the glaring and excessive neo-historical anachronisms of steampunk become most apparent. This chapter relies on the argument that participation in these aesthetics can be to *degrees*, and that the anachronisms in steampunk, at times, are to such a degree that they also dramatically push the neo-historical aesthetic's boundaries.

The recurrence of the nineteenth century as the focus for such technological inventions may, in part, be linked to developments in technology in that period itself. As Carolyn Marvin (1988: 1) explains, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, 'Five proto-mass media of the twentieth century were invented [...]: the telephone, phonograph, electric light, wireless, and cinema'. However, the steampunk aesthetic imagines technology that is inspired by the Victorian period, but in its function and appearance, such technology far exceeds any technology that actually existed in the nineteenth century. Marvin's work makes clear that, although the technologies are clearly implausibly anachronistic, they do link to a certain temporal moment of technological development.

Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker* is part of her *Clockwork Century* series,<sup>7</sup> novels that are often thought by both fans and critics to be among the defining steampunk of the twenty-first century (see, for example, Michelle 2011; Perschon 2012; Siemann 2013). The series narrates an invented version of the United States in the nineteenth century, a world in which advanced technology has carried the Civil War onto 1877. In *Boneshaker*, Seattle has been devastated by drilling—performed by the eponymous 'Boneshaker' drill—which had the unexpected consequence of releasing dangerous natural gases from the earth, which turn humans into zombies;<sup>8</sup> Seattle is now walled off to contain the zombies and protect the humans outside the city. Already evident in this summary are the consistent links between steampunk and wider traditions of fantasy and science fiction.

The text contains steampunk dirigibles, one of the few pieces of technology that appear consistently across a vast range of steampunk texts, and a number of other machines that help to improve characters' miserable lives. However, it is in the descriptions of the drill, used in 1860, that the ambivalence at the heart of the text's relationship to technology is exposed. The drill was first invented when:

In 1860 the Russians announced a contest, offering a 100,000 ruble prize to the inventor who could produce or propose a machine that could mine through ice in search of gold. And in this way, a scientific arms race began despite a budding civil war. (Priest 2009: 16)

‘Despite a budding civil war’ emphasises the perceived immorality of this measure; the narrative suggests that the impending war should have been more important than the pursuit of gold, but the technological and greed-inspired ‘arms race’ is all-encompassing. Technology is implicitly defined as being in the same moral field as armaments by the use of that term.

As in many descriptions of technology in steampunk literature, the drill itself is described in meticulous detail:

It would be the greatest mining vehicle ever constructed: fifty feet long and fully mechanized, powered by compressed steam. It would boast three primary drilling and cutting heads, positioned at the front of the craft; and a system of spiral shoveling devices mounted along the back and sides would scoop the bored-through ice, rocks, or earth back out of the drilling path. Carefully weighted and meticulously reinforced, this machine could drill in an almost perfect vertical or horizontal path, depending on the whims of the man in the driver’s seat. (Priest 2009: 16)

The length and detail of this description gives readers access to a vision of a technological device that did not exist. Giving so much information about it helps us to picture it and to (attempt to) understand how it works. The description, therefore, in some ways works as a celebration of the possibilities of technology itself, revelling in the complexity of the machine, exploring each aspect of it with care and attention, offering a fully rounded and intensely detailed picture. This presents an interesting counterpoint to the arguments of theorist Nicholas Carr (2010: 2; although there are many points of similarity between Carr’s work and steampunk’s approach to technology, here they differ), when he writes that ‘whenever a new medium comes along, people naturally get caught up in the information—the “content”—it carries [...] The technology of the medium, however astonishing it may be, disappears behind whatever flows through it’. Carr argues that we lose sight of technology itself in our enthusiasm for what it can do or provide. However, this commitment to detail in explanations of steampunk technology suggests the opposite. ‘Content’ is not entirely possible with a drill, but the overall argument remains pertinent if we read ‘content’ as meaning the *product* of technology. However, the purpose of the drill is (temporarily) made subordinate to the clear and thorough explanation of how this new technology works. The ‘technology of the medium’ is very much the focus, rather than ‘disappearing’. The presence of this extreme detail also makes a more ambiguous statement about steampunk representations of technology. Priest’s text seems to imply

that we must understand *exactly* what it does, *exactly* how it does it, and *exactly* how it is powered (by steam, of course).

A hint at ambivalence towards technology is also present in ‘depending on the whims of the man in the driver’s seat’. There are clearly questions about control. It is not just the technology about which steampunk texts are uncertain; it is also who is in charge of the technology, under whose ‘whims’ it functions. That word ‘whims’ is particularly appropriate in the context; it implies the potential for sudden change. It also emphasises the very personal nature of the decision itself; a whim belongs to one person alone, and it is not the product of discursively shared consideration. Carr’s (2010: 5) ambivalence towards technology becomes apparent when he argues that ‘The implication, comforting in its hubris’ of this content-focused way of understanding technology ‘is that we’re in control. The technology is just a tool, inert until we pick it up and inert again once we set it aside’. He emphasises the human-centric argument that places people in control of technology, with the implication that this is a naive assumption. Technology may not be as inert without us as we think. This highlights the one type of anxiety about who *controls* technology.

In *Boneshaker*, there are also descriptions of the catastrophe that results from the drilling, which ‘might only have been an accident’, ‘a terrible malfunction of equipment running amuck’. This is the moment at which this hubristic conception of technology is punctured, when we become aware that technology, in Carr’s conception, may in fact not be inert without human involvement:

It may have been nothing more than confusion, or bad timing, or improper calculations. Or then again, it might have been a calculated move after all, plotted to bring down a city’s core with unprecedented violence and mercenary greed. (Priest 2009: 17)

Technology, it seems, whether under someone’s whim or independently malfunctioning, is fascinating, absorbing, difficult to understand, and potentially very dangerous. Both fascinating and alarming, steampunk technology is a strange and ambivalent trope. The next section of the chapter will compare these dramatic and inventive anachronistic devices, explicitly inserted into imagined versions of the nineteenth century, with the subtler, less world-defining anachronisms of the neo-historical aesthetic.

**Neo-historical anachronisms: Plausibility, implausibility, and the ontological gaps of ghosts**

This description of the Boneshaker drill, identifying a certain kind of steampunk (and steam-powered) technology, reveals the ways in which the steampunk aesthetic extends the neo-historical aesthetic. As an anachronism, this drill, like a dirigible, a velocipede, or an aethographic transmitter (all discussed below), is much more obvious as an insertion into the past than the neo-historical, present-day politics, language, cultures, ideas, and identities that have been discussed in previous chapters. Neo-historical anachronisms are generally embedded in their narratives, i.e. they act as subtle disruptions, opening new fictional spaces in which the real and the not-real coexist. This is quite distinct from the much more extended, large-scale re-narrativisations that steampunk anachronisms create.

Gail Jones's neo-historical *Sixty Lights* contains a measured, neo-historical representation of the past and of technology. *Sixty Lights* narrates the short life of Lucy Strange, who is born in Australia, and migrates to the UK as a child, after the deaths of her parents. In young adulthood, Lucy is sent to India to be married to a friend of her guardian. She has a sexual relationship with a fellow passenger on the boat, and arrives in India pregnant, as her lover leaves her to be with his wife. During her pregnancy, Lucy discovers a fascination with taking photographs and with photographic images, and she continues to engage in this pastime for the rest of her life. She gives birth to a daughter in India, before returning, still unmarried, to the UK. Here, Lucy lives with her family and daughter, has another sexual relationship, and then dies of tuberculosis at twenty-one, leaving behind a whole range of photographs.

The version of the past in *Sixty Lights* draws on the 'real' nineteenth century (i.e. as much as we can possibly understand from historical record) and on our received image of the period (i.e. the narrative of the nineteenth century that persists in our cultural consciousness). Reactions to Lucy's pregnancy, given that she is not married, would be broadly negative in both. In general, both steampunk and the neo-historical aesthetic draw on popular ideas of the past, often more than historical record or academic history. Much of our present-day view of unmarried pregnancy in the Victorian period is derived from cultural products both from the relevant period and from the present day. So, for example, in *Bleak House* (1853), Lady Dedlock abandons her illegitimate daughter, Esther, and evidently lives in profound fear of the consequences of acknowledging her child. This nineteenth-century novel was been revived in the popular imagination in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by two widely-watched BBC adaptations of the novel (Devenish

and White 1985; Chadwick and White 2005). In general, the wider brush strokes of *Sixty Lights* do not divert from ‘canonical’ history; *Sixty Lights* loosely coheres with those received ideas about the past, which dictate how we think it looked (the clothes, the architecture), the key events we understand to have occurred within it (Dickens’s death occurs during the novel, for example [Jones 2004: 172]), and the broad strokes of how we understand people’s everyday lives to have been lived (the home life, the difficulties of poverty and work, the risks of major diseases). Lucy’s brother, Thomas, is shocked and concerned by her pregnancy. He assumes she has been raped and promises retribution for the man who has ‘robbed you of your innocence’ (Jones 2004: 148). That ‘robbed’ makes the sexual advance and control exclusively Lucy’s lover’s, when in fact she clearly consented to it (‘Lucy responded with grateful enthusiasm; she had waited for this touch, this confirmation’ [Jones 2004: 111-112]). Thomas’s reaction is, in many ways, a ‘canonical’ nineteenth century one, tied to our expectations of the ruined ‘fallen woman’ (and this coherence with expectations occurs in spite of his own anachronistic status, which I will discuss below).

Lucy is surrounded by a version of the nineteenth century that is in accordance with our assumptions about the period. Her response to her pregnancy, however, is tellingly anachronistic, which knowingly identifies this text as a different, critically engaged way of narrating the past. In contrast to Lady Dedlock’s fears of condemnation, in *Sixty Lights*, Lucy does not seem to fear negative consequences from her pregnancy at all. Upon realising ‘that a child was forming in her unmarried womb’, she ‘greeted her pregnancy in a rapture of confident serenity’ (Jones 2004: 126, 127), with no fear of retribution for it. Jones emphasises that Lucy’s pregnancy is unorthodox with that word ‘unmarried’, although it is an exclusively physical reference, to her ‘unmarried womb’. The emphasis, then, is not on Lucy’s mind or her reputation, or on any of the rest of her body. Instead, it is on her womb, the physical location of the foetus and of Lucy’s capacity to reproduce. Already this is a move away from assumptions about the nineteenth century. Lucy’s ‘rapture of confident serenity’ is entirely calm, apparently not concerned, and the Christian overtones of ‘rapture’ suggest a state of religious happiness. In her rapture, then, Lucy anachronistically transcends our assumptions about a woman’s reaction to her own unmarried pregnancy in the nineteenth century.

Lucy’s relationship to photography—to newly developing technologies—also participates in her anachronistic responses. She develops this interest while she is pregnant, and she is permitted to learn photography because it is considered to be a ‘not-

too-unladylike occupation' (Jones 2004: 141). As a newly developed form in the period of the novel's setting (again, see Marvin 1988), photography is, in Jones's (2004: 141) novel: 'Chemicals, glass, mechanical reproduction—these combined to make Lucy feel entirely modern, a woman of the future'. That Lucy feels 'entirely modern', and thus part of the fashionable moment of the nineteenth century, is an interesting contrast with also being the 'woman of the future'. A *Guardian* review also described Lucy as 'eerily ahead of her time' (Elderkin 2004). She is partly 'a woman of the future'—of our twenty-first-century present—because her response to her pregnancy seems more associated with the (twentieth and) twenty-first century than the nineteenth, and photography further contributes to this. In her response to and comfort with new technologies, she shows that she is at ease with contemporary developments—and anticipating those to come in the future.

It is significant that *photography* makes Lucy feel 'entirely modern' and, simultaneously, a 'woman of the future'. Lindsay Smith (2007: 253) writes of 'The allusion of a photographic portrait to a future as a place of return, as a realm at some level already known'. Smith emphasises the temporal dislocation of photography, which is always gesturing towards a future in which we will look back at the images in the photograph itself. This is tied to the achronological structures of haunting, which inherently hint at an anticipated future of return, and Smith helpfully positions photography within a similar temporal structure: it is resistant to linearity and thus useful for neo-historical analysis. This future reference of photography is particularly poignant in this novel, because Lucy takes many photographs but leaves behind only one of herself after her death, almost hinting from the outset that her lived future is limited. It is also her deliberate intent to 'live on' through the photographs she has taken, instead of those in which she appears. This relates to, but is also quite different from, the Book of the Dead in *The Others* (2001), which was discussed in the previous chapter. As I discussed in relation to that album of photographic portraits of dead people, there is a spectralising effect also in Lucy's invisible position behind the camera, the guiding hand that creates and produces the images. As a spectralised photographer, then, Lucy's metaphorical future and her twenty-first-century anachronistic character are present in this novel. For Lucy, the future (and our present) is indeed a 'place of return', as in Smith's definition of photographs, but so is the past; she is both things simultaneously and she can, achronologically, neo-historically, move between the two. The narrative of *Sixty Lights* thus participates in the post-postmodern structure of the neo-historical aesthetic, with Lucy's anachronistic thoughts and actions

positioning her as a chronologically resistant figure within a generally traditionally configured historical context.

In her challenging relationship to her historical position, Lucy—and *Sixty Lights* in general—has a vivid relationship to ghosts and ghostliness, which acts as an important metaphor for her spectrally anachronistic position. Ghosts permeate the entire narrative, whether in the photographs that Lucy leaves behind, marking her spectral presence after her death, or in her brother Thomas who is enthused by ‘phantasmagoria’, and who, when sleepwalking, ‘is otherworldly and implacably absent. She knows he communes with ghosts. She knows he meets in this nomadic state, this shadowy night wandering, the father and mother she herself never manages to see’ (Jones 2004: 105). Lucy’s absolute certainty—she *knows*—that he not only sees but ‘communes with’ ghosts makes Thomas, in contrast to his previous period-coherence, an actively anachronistic participant in the neo-historical aesthetic. He communes with the dead past, with their parents, who are brought spectrally into being by his sleeping nomadism. As Julian Wolfreys (2002: 5) puts it: ‘The spectral is [...] a matter of recognizing what is disorderly within an apparently straightforward temporal framework’. Thomas and Lucy are both, therefore, disorderly in the nineteenth century setting. They are spectral in different ways, communing with the past and the future respectively, disconnecting a linear temporal framework in favour of a post-Derridean, post-postmodern spectral and achronological order of time. There is nothing implausible about this: ghosts here do not fundamentally disrupt the version of the past with which we are presented; it is not wildly different from the past we thought we knew. They rather offer an ontologically different space, in which our understanding of what the past is—after postmodernism—is deconstructed in favour of the uncertain ‘truths’ that fiction and spectrality can offer.

This requires analysis of a specific kind of plausibility: *how* disruptive an anachronism is to its historical setting. In the neo-historical texts discussed previously—such as *Life Mask* (2004), *The Night Watch* (2006), and *The Awakening* (2011) to name just a few—as well as in *Sixty Lights*, as I have shown, the knowing anachronisms are apparent to the middlebrow, critically-engaged reader, but they do not fundamentally disrupt an idea of what the past looked like. Words such as ‘queer’, or haunting proleptic hints at the characters’ known futures, or a spectral sense that a character’s emotional position is ahead of its time, these anachronisms are challenging because they subtly but emphatically disrupt versions of the past that broadly follow ‘traditional history’ (Buse and Stott 1999: 14). In discussing the neo-historical aesthetic in *Sixty Lights*, I have demonstrated that the



narrative portrays a fictional rendition of a period that closely resembles what we think we know about it, but that knowingly incorporates aspects of present-day politics—offering that haunted ‘nudge’ to the reader, with similar effects to ‘queer’, but here in relation to a loosely feminist politics. Neo-historical anachronisms and neo-historical spectrality, therefore, do not deviate too far from our understanding of a period, but instead shift certain aspects of that period slightly. At times these neo-histories provide comforting reassurance that the present is more egalitarian than the troubled past, offering a teleological narrative of progress and enlightenment from the problems of that past. This image of the nineteenth century thus brings us to a reassuring present day; it is certainly less common in twenty-first-century Britain for unmarried women to face social exclusion as a consequence of becoming pregnant while unmarried, and Lucy’s anachronism serves to comfortingly reinforce the ‘progress’ from the past in this respect. Lucy’s deviation from the nineteenth century around her is remarkable and striking, but her presence is not implausible to an extent that completely deconstructs the setting. She is not so anachronistic as to deviate hugely from the nineteenth-century woman; it is only in her subtly independent response to her pregnancy that Lucy strikes us as unusual for our imagined idea of the nineteenth century. In the previous chapter, I discussed how, particularly as a critical tool, spectres are not inherently implausible; we might not believe in ghosts, but a history that includes them does not necessarily have to identify an entirely different world. When I refer to ‘plausibility’ in these discussions about steampunk, therefore, I am building on my use of it in the ghosts chapter. There, I discussed how ghosts worked to blur the boundaries of real/not real in the neo-historical aesthetic. As such, the neo-historical aesthetic can use its plausibility to create lineages that cement that present and a new version of the past more firmly in the public consciousness.

Clockwork, steam-powered, flying rotorchairs, on the other hand, could not have existed in the nineteenth century. In *Boneshaker*, and other steampunk texts like it, the anachronisms are so glaring as to be inescapable—they are implausible insertions into the imagined past, which deliberately entirely disrupt our idea of historical narrative. They suggest possible versions of history that are wildly and explicitly divergent from how we broadly understand the past to have looked. Unlike the neo-historical aesthetic, steampunk does not create new historical narratives by slightly deviating from history as we know it; instead, it deviates far from the ‘canonical’ nineteenth century. While technology is one of the defining features of steampunk, this is not its only deviation from the nineteenth century that we know. Many steampunk texts are replete with vampires,

werewolves, zombies, and much more. But instead of taking the ephemeral, liminal state of ghosts as a productive ontological gap, steampunk tends to opt for the visceral, often violent, flesh and blood side of the Gothic. Even when steampunk does contain ghosts—such as in the *Parasol Protectorate* series—they tend to be more physically rendered. The *Parasol Protectorate* ghosts are limited to existing within a certain radius of their corpses, and their sanity disintegrates alongside their corpse's decay. This only serves to reinforce my comments that it is the liminality and uncertain, disembodied status of ghosts that allows them to cohere with neo-historical plausibility, where the very solidity of imagery in steampunk serves to reinforce its implausibility. Steampunk is deliberately implausible, by which I mean there is no way we can imagine that its narratives might possibly have happened in the nineteenth century.

### **Implausible and extreme steampunk anachronisms**

Each anachronism, each piece of technological equipment that is described in steampunk, takes the aesthetic further and further away from our received ideas about the Victorian period and thus further and further from plausibility. The technology itself is what identifies this excessive deployment of the neo-historical aesthetic:

A velocipede chattered past. They had started to appear on the streets two years ago, these steam-driven, one-man vehicles, and were popularly known as 'penny-farthings' due to their odd design, for the front wheel was nearly as tall as a man, while the back wheel was just eighteen inches in diameter.

The rider was seated high in a leather saddle, situated slightly behind the crown of the front wheel, with his feet resting in stirrups to either side, his legs held away from the piston arm and crank which pumped and span to the left of the axle. The tiny, box-like engine was attached to the frame behind and below the saddle; the small boiler, with its furnace, was under this, and the coal scuttle under that; the three elements arranged in a segmented arc over the top rear section of the main wheel. As well as providing the motive power, they were also the machine's centre of gravity and, together with the engine's internal gyroscope, made the vehicle almost impossible to knock over, despite its ungainly appearance. (Hodder 2010: 48-49)

In this case of invented technology, Hodder builds on existing images and language from the nineteenth century. Hodder uses the words 'penny-farthing' and 'velocipede' interchangeably to describe this machine; the latter was the general nineteenth-century

term for what we now call a bicycle, the former was a specific example of it, and they are thus both real antecedents of a modern device. The penny-farthing in particular is a familiar image in ideas of the Victorian period—not least because its unmatched wheels are noticeably different from bicycles in the present day. Penny-farthings appear in popular histories about the period and in recent representations of the nineteenth century: see the BBC and British Museum online collaboration *A History of the World* (BBC 2012), for example, and the HBO series *Deadwood* (2004-2006; Van Patten 2005). The uneven-wheeled penny-farthing is certainly well recognised as a nineteenth-century invention and thus it is initially not greatly different from ‘canonical’ history. As Hodder’s description of the velocipede progresses, however, the steampunk penny-farthing moves away from our existing idea of the real penny-farthing. The stirrups, the ‘piston arm and crank’, the engine, furnace, and coal scuttle dramatically alter that image. By the end of this description, the ‘real’, canonical image from the Victorian period has been entirely pushed to the side in favour of this technological invention. Steampunk’s neo-historical anachronisms, its steam-powered velocipedes, push beyond the usual boundaries of the neo-historical aesthetic—beyond an implied analysis of the structure of accessing history through narrative, through plausible disruptions—and invent a much more dramatically different historical landscape.<sup>9</sup>

Jeff VanderMeer (2011: 25), one of the foremost (and few) theorists of steampunk, describes Edgar Allen Poe’s beliefs as follows:

[...] art combined with fact could yield new realities. The more absurd a story, the more Poe strove to make it authentic by writing in what he called the ‘plausible style’, in which punctilious details were authentic enough to read as truth. As a result, Poe perpetuated several successful hoaxes, proving that, during times of rapid scientific advancement, fact and fiction are often indistinguishable to the layperson. In a similar manner, Steampunk writers today must make outdated inventions believable, much as a historical novelist must animate the past.

VanderMeer (and Poe, though VanderMeer is paraphrasing) uses the word ‘authentic’ to mean ‘appearing to be real’. This raises further questions about the meaning of ‘authenticity’ in the present day, returning to discussions that I raised in chapter one. ‘Authentic enough’ is interesting, because it emphasises that VanderMeer’s use of the term relies on a spectrum of authenticity, rather than an ontological binary of real/not real or accurate/inaccurate. Here, again, these ontological gaps persistently open up in the neo-

historical aesthetic, and it is into this gap that these debates about plausibility and implausibility are drawn.

VanderMeer claims that the use of ‘punctilious detail’—as in descriptions of steampunk tech—is a path towards a ‘plausible style’, towards making ‘outdated inventions believable’. There is a clear problem with the idea that steampunk inventions are ‘outdated’ since the motorised velocipede and the Boneshaker drill never actually existed (although now, the former does—see note 9). Many steampunk inventions are loosely based on prototypes or ideas from the Victorian period, from Charles Babbage’s Difference/Analytical Engine portrayed in William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s genre-defining *The Difference Engine* (1990) and in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), discussed in the previous chapter, to Brunel’s atmospheric railway in *Spring-Heeled Jack*, and to the ever-present dirigibles. Similarly, as I suggested above, the development of communications technologies and media in the nineteenth century, as revealed by Carolyn Marvin’s (1988) work, is mirrored in these steampunk novels, even as those technologies are pushed far beyond their real parallels.

Whether entirely imaginary or based on a real Victorian idea, however, these are not anachronisms in the way that VanderMeer implies; they are not devices that may have been ‘real’ in a different moment to their current nineteenth-century setting. They are anachronistic because they are—even when building on past ideas—invented creations, the product of ideas about contemporary technology and its functionality—as I will discuss below. Importantly, they are *imagined*, not outdated—and VanderMeer (2011: 32) comments later that the ‘meticulousness’ of steampunk descriptions emphasises the ‘nuts-and-bolts reality of [...] improbable invention[s]’. This description of the technology as ‘improbable’ coheres better with what I see in these extended steampunk descriptions: that making the inventions *believable* or plausible is not relevant to the steampunk aesthetic. As the steam alterations to the penny-farthing show, steampunk technology does not aspire to appear plausible in relation to accepted ideas about the Victorian period. Instead, it revels in its own implausibility, using ‘punctilious details’ to create striking images of imagined technology, but never appearing to be a ‘real’ version of the past, not even one that disrupts the concept of ‘real’ historical narrative with anachronisms—as the neo-historical aesthetic does.

### **Contemporary anxieties about technology: The spectralising effects of the virtual**

This next section of the chapter will consider what aspects of contemporary technology are manifested in these steampunk inventions, and will suggest that this is a product of certain contemporary anxieties about an overreliance on technology in the twenty-first century. Why does steampunk reimagine the past with such dramatic alterations to the science and technology in it? What is the purpose of inventing such implausible, clearly imagined machines? Why, indeed, do these texts engage in such distant estrangement from our received understanding of history? Unlike the more measured manifestations of the neo-historical aesthetic, in which ontological gaps are opened to disrupt an understanding of the past in narrative, steampunk cannot and does not change our understanding of the process of writing historical narrative, because of its implausibility.

The communication device, the aethographic transmitter, used in the *Parasol Protectorate* series, is first introduced in the second book, *Changeless*. Again, this communication device might be linked to the developments in communications technology in the period in which the novel is set, and Marvin emphasises (1988: 5) that during this period ‘Electrical and other media precipitated new kinds of social encounters’, and ‘Classes, families, and professional communities struggled to come to terms with novel acoustic and visual devices that made possible communication in real time without real presence’. This is a socio-cultural change of substantial significance, and *Changeless*, if not necessarily knowingly, plays on this, even as it responds to some very identifiably present-day concerns about communications technology as well. In this novel, Alexia Maccon—our protagonist—travels with some friends, in a dirigible, of course, to investigate the disappearance of her werewolf husband. Adventures ensue, with a spy in Alexia’s staff revealed, in the end, to have caused much of the mischief throughout the plot. Alexia takes her friend’s (Lord Akeldama’s) aethographic transmitter with her on her travels, to enable long-distance communication as needed. The transmitter was invented, according to Alexia, ‘shortly after the telegraph proved itself an entirely unviable method of communication’, and ‘There’d been a noted gap in long-distance communication ever since, with the scientific community scrabbling to invent something that was more compatible with highly magnetic aetheromagnetic gasses’ (Carriger, 2010a: 97). Until 1887, this was the real, commonly-held view of how radio waves were transmitted—through the ‘aether’ or ‘ether’—until the Michelson Morley (1887) experiment revealed the flaws in this belief and began the process through which the aether’s existence was finally disproved. In the *Parasol Protectorate* world, however, these ‘aetheromagnetic’ gases are real substances present in the air in the world of these novels—pushing it again away

from the ‘real’ past of other neo-historical texts, and acting as another, strangely insubstantial and spectral steampunk presence in these steampunk worlds. The gases are the fuel and structure through which all technology works in the *Parasol Protectorate*, and its technological devices are therefore already associated with an anxious process of spectralisation.

Before Alexia and Madame Lefoux go away to Scotland, Lord Akeldama takes them into ‘what should have been the attic’ of his London-based house:

It proved, instead, to have been made over into an elaborate room hung with medieval tapestries and filled with an enormous box, large enough to house two horses. It was raised up off the floor via a complex system of springs and was quilted in a thick fabric to prevent ambient noise from reaching its interior. The box itself comprised two small rooms filled with machinery. The first, Lord Akeldama described as the transmitting room, and the second the receiving room. (Carriger 2010a: 96)

The sheer scale of the aethographic transmitter is startling; a whole attic room is given over to it, with a box large enough for two horses. This scale is then complemented by the complexity of the machine’s working, with the need for two separate rooms and the necessity of preventing ‘ambient noise’ from interfering with it, and a ‘complex system of springs’. This solidity and scale of the device are conspicuous counterpoints to the spectral gases upon which the transmitter depends. While the aethographic transmitter does enable communication over large distances, its functionality is bafflingly complex, with Lord Akeldama’s advanced ‘crystalline compatibility protocol’, which he uses instead of an ordinary ‘resonator cradle’. Messages can only be sent at pre-arranged times and with the machine constantly attended during those times in order to receive them (Carriger 2010a: 98).

The messages received through the transmitter are often almost incomprehensible. When Alexia attempts to send a test message to Lord Akeldama from Scotland, the message becomes garbled in transmission: ‘Instead of “testing Scots”, he had read “tasting Scots”’ (Carriger 2010a: 211). When attempting to decode another message that has been left in the machine and that might be the key to discovering the spy, Alexia ‘was disgruntled that the bloody thing did not read like an old-fashioned ink-and-paper letter, with a “dear so-and-so” and a “sincerely so-and-so”, thus revealing all to her without fuss’ (Carriger 2010a: 250). Put very simply: the scale, complexity, and poor functionality of this machine are clearly in stark contrast to the size and functionality of present-day

communication devices—easily transportable and functioning in a wider and wider range of situations. Quick communication on a smartphone is evidently very different from the aethographic transmitter's brief messages, which are receivable only in a specific room that takes at least half an hour to prepare for them. There is a profound *physical* and *functional* difference between steampunk technology and its present-day counterparts.

In their introduction to their special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Rachel Bowser and Brian Croxall (2010: 16, 17) argue that 'When a device like the iPad has only one button and is a sealed slab of glass and metal, we face becoming alienated from our technology'. They argue that this is the reason that steampunk technology is invariably 'extremely large and heavy', thus drawing a clear and relevant link between concerns about the present and an attempt to resolve those concerns in the imagined past. Bowser and Croxall suggest that heavy steampunk technology (like the aethographic transmitter, although they do not reference this item directly) acts as a comforting relief from the rapid progress currently occurring in communications technology, which problematises our ability to engage with devices and to understand how the technology around us works. This is reinforced by steampunk DIY culture, wherein there is a definite sense that the size and scale of the objects people create are a reaction against the 'sleek and plastic world we have come to rely on' (Grymme 2001: 7). Bowser and Croxall (2010: 22) argue that steampunk cosplayers create their own steampunk-style tech as an anti-consumerist punk rebellion against this alienation from technology and against its homogenisation in general, 'remaking our relationship with the tools of the present'.

Bowser and Croxall's argument is, at times, very convincing; it is plausible that there is a resistant, DIY element to steampunk, responding to an anxiously uncertain understanding of the functionality of contemporary technology. However, it is worth bearing in mind that, in their discussion of this underground political rebellion, they occasionally lose sight of the fact that steampunk technology is *fun*. The extended descriptions of each gadget in the novels are there, at least in part, so that readers can appreciate and enjoy the complexity of these imagined technologies. They can be absurd and are, at times, quite funny. This is one, much simpler, argument for these extended descriptions; it is not counter to Bowser and Croxall's view, but in addition to it. As shown above, the aethographic transmitter is vividly realised in Carriger's novel (even if it remains rather confusing) and this, in its own right, demonstrates a certain joy in what technology is, what it can do, and how alternative versions of it might work. Plus, the aethographic transmitter, the velocipede, the rotorchair, and the Boneshaker drill only begin to cover

some of the more amusingly outlandish steampunk technologies. For example, in one novel, a giant millipede is killed, its entrails are removed, a steam engine inserted, and chairs put in, to create ‘a new type of omnibus’ (Hodder 2011: 86). Gory and absurdist at times, these technologies are clearly created with amusement in mind as well as having political intentions. Plus, the extended descriptions of these technologies may offer greater capacity for their real-world, cosplay counterparts; if the devices are described in meticulous detail it is more possible for people to recreate their look, if not their functionality—another fun element to the symbiotic relationship between steampunk literature and cosplay. Bowser and Croxall neglect this element of sheer entertainment value in their highly politicised account of these popular novels.

However, my emphasis on fun does not underestimate the simultaneous and conflicted ambivalence about steampunk technology. In enthusiastically arguing for a radical, left-wing punk rebellion in steampunk, Bowser and Croxall also do not acknowledge these *conservative* political aspects of it, which run self-contradictorily alongside its more left-wing anti-consumerist elements. Even with these politics in mind, I will argue that the solidity of steampunk technology also offers comfort and reassurance about the virtual and the intangible aspects of technology. Steampunk is, in this respect, working within the same discursive space as the spectral aspects of the neo-historical aesthetic, but where the latter seeks to use and expand those spaces, steampunk seeks to close them down with an emphatic emphasis on solidity. Again, steampunk technology is often frightening, dangerous, and alarming, as in the title of this chapter: ‘clockwork always rings alarm bells’ (Hodder 2011: 357). This might seem to belie this reassuring potential. However, this is integral to the steampunk aesthetic’s ambivalence. It metaphorically demonstrates that we are afraid, by giving us terrifying technology, often controlled by the ‘whims’ of dangerous people, but also offers a comforting reassurance: we will beat these villains and their alarming technologies, because those technologies are singularly inadequate against people. In this respect, even where I have argued that these texts are radically, implausibly divergent from traditional history, they also work to conservatively validate the present, and to resolve anxieties within it. This is also relevant to understanding the resolution of a different issue in relation to technology: not alienation from *it*, as Bowser and Croxall suggest, although this argument is clearly also valid, but fears of alienation from each other and from ourselves, as a consequence of an invested relationship to technological devices.

One contemporary concern to which steampunk responds, is a fear of technology’s spectralising effects, which are described by Peter Buse and Andrew Stott (1999: 17) in



the extract that I quoted at the end of the previous chapter: if we ‘find ourselves unable to come to terms with the latest technology’ we become anachronisms ourselves, outdated and no longer inhabiting the appropriate, current temporal moment. Buse and Stott’s argument is that all anachronisms are inherently spectral, because of being disconnected from linear time, and they thus imply that being unable to ‘keep up’ with new developments in technology is a *spectralising* experience. In this structure, technology, instead of being profoundly disruptive to straightforward chronologies, like the ghosts I discussed previously, insists upon a forward march of development, one that imposes a strict linearity on the contemporary moment. Anyone unable to keep up with that progression is, essentially, a ghostly anachronism. In a notably technology-suspicious narrative, these theorists imply that technology has the potential to dismiss as spectral and anachronistic anything (and anyone) that cannot adhere to its rapid and strictly linear rate of development.

Buse and Stott (1999: 17) further argue: ‘if we want to find today’s ghosts, we should look to the workings of telecommunications, the activities of the media, that omniscient absence-presence, in which our “contemporary” spectrality is to be found’. They insist upon the spectralising process of using ‘telecommunications’ technology, on the ‘absence-presence’ of communicating through virtual means. The scale and dysfunctional nature of the aethographic transmitter works against such a spectralising process of communications technology, emphasising its limitations with a solidity that pushes against Buse and Stott’s contemporary absence-presence. The substantial presences of steampunk technology, therefore, can be read as an emphatically physical and reactionary response to this spectralisation. We are offered a solidity to technology that implies it is not spectral or spectralising, however anachronistic it may be. We are also given many details about the way steampunk technology functions, perhaps partly to ensure that we do not become these spectralised anachronisms in relation to it: we will not be left behind here. Asserting their uncertain relationships to technology in this text (that ‘omniscient’ in relation to the media returns to that anxiety about control and ‘whims’ that I noted with *Boneshaker* above), Buse and Stott emphasise that ‘today’s ghosts’ are produced by such disembodied communications. This draws attention to a major field of thought and reactionary anxiety in contemporary analyses of technology.

Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, highlights similar concerns in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011). The title of this work clearly

states Turkle's (2011: 10) argument that technology has begun to negatively influence human relationships, reducing our enthusiasm for face-to-face contact and instead prioritising solitude and 'the comfort of connection without the demands of intimacy'. Similar positions are visible in the works of Jaron Lanier (2010) and Nicholas Carr (2010). In emphasising 'the comfort of connection without the demands of intimacy', Turkle describes what she sees as the limiting effects of online communication via social networking and virtual reality games; she reads this as inhibiting human interaction and emotional connection. There is subtle wordplay in that word, implying that human 'connections' are now only derived through internet connections. Turkle (2011: 12) asks: 'Does virtual intimacy degrade our experience of the other kind and, indeed, of all encounters of any kind?' Jaron Lanier (2010: 4) similarly suggests that the 'fragmentary impersonal communication' that takes place online 'has demeaned interpersonal interaction'. Both Turkle and Lanier (to simplify their different positions) argue that we are fundamentally overreliant on using technology to communicate and that this is working to alienate us, not from our technologies necessarily (as Bowser and Croxall think), but from each other. Turkle argues that our ability to engage in face-to-face intimacy is degraded by our frequent participation in connections via technological communications devices.

Turkle and Lanier also represent a cultural discourse—prominent in contemporary culture and society—that emphasises a humanist perspective and that firmly separates the individual from their potential technological engagements, and their technological life: 'one's life is one thing; one's technology is quite a different matter'. So, for example, the changing (or what she sees as limiting) terms of intimacy in the twenty-first century represents a particular anxiety for Turkle (2011: 3), given that, for her, 'Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and humanising—thing we do'. Lanier (2010: 4) similarly reads our use of communications technologies as producing 'a reduced expectation of what a person can be, and of who each person might become'. These references to intimacy as humanising, and to technology as reductive to personhood, create sharp distinctions between technology and the human. Also, this investment in face-to-face communication and intimacy connects with Buse and Stott's view of the spectralising processes of telecommunications technology: without face-to-face contact, we become 'today's ghosts'. My quotations from technology-resistant theorists such as Turkle and Lanier (and Carr, previously, and even, to a certain degree, Buse and Stott) is, of course, not intended to suggest that such an anxious and ambivalent attitude towards

technology is by any means the only, or even the predominant experience of technology in the twenty-first century. I suggest instead that such prominent thinkers represent just one current discursive field, the same field in which contemporary steampunk participates. It is another conspicuous point of correlation that the limitations of Turkle's arguments—particularly in their unacknowledged emphasis on heteronormative, wealthy, consumerist lifestyles—have much in common with some of these steampunk texts' representations of culture and society, although there is not much capacity to discuss that in this chapter. I wish to focus instead on the concerns highlighted by Lanier and Turkle about the dehumanising effects of technology, and their impact on the intimacy that Turkle reads as integral to face-to-face communication.<sup>10</sup>

The aethographic transmitter cannot be easily moved, and thus throughout the *Parasol Protectorate* series, the use of the device has limitations in assisting non-face-to-face communication—it comes nowhere near it. Turkle's argument that our real-world communications technology degrades face-to-face contact is metaphorically played out in characters' inability to communicate by using their devices. Failures of communication, like those experienced with the aethographic transmitter, abound in steampunk novels. In Shelley Adina's *Lady of Devices* (2011: 19), the 'tubes'—connections for sending letters at speed across the city—are frequently intercepted, so that protagonist Claire is unable to contact anyone while she is in hiding. The tubes are described as 'snak[ing] beneath London like a veritable Medusa of communication'. Using Medusa's snake-hair as a point of reference also evokes her power to turn people to stone. Instead of facilitating communication, then, these snake-like tubes implicitly create stillness and silence. Meanwhile, in the second novel in the *Steampunk Chronicles* series,<sup>11</sup> *The Girl in the Clockwork Collar* (2012), Finley's far too easily broken 'pocket telegraph' machine is so flawed that it does not function well enough for her contact her friends while she is undercover, which places her in great danger, but which also leads to highly emotionally charged interactions with her loved ones when she is able to escape from her undercover operations and see them face-to-face (Cross 2012: 216, 304). To give one more example: the parakeets that are used for communication in the *Burton and Swinburne* series (not obviously technology, but genetically modified and part of the alternative technologies in that world) travel across great distances in order to deliver messages, but are not able to perform this delivery without swearing and insulting the recipient, often losing meaning in the process (Hodder 2010: 42, for example). Persistently, these steampunk technologies fail to encourage or permit intimacy (or indeed communication of any kind, intimate or

otherwise); they emphasise physical distances between characters and the problems of attempting to communicate across those distances, even with the help of technology. In other words, unlike Lanier's (2010: 4) argument that 'Communication is now often experienced as a superhuman phenomenon', these representations of communications technology in steampunk emphatically push back against this, deliberately limiting and controlling technology's potential.

These examples of limited communications technology demonstrate that there is a very deliberate evasion at play; authors avoid replicating the full functionality of and reliance upon present-day technology. These steampunk novels, then, propose that attempting to communicate via technology is inherently flawed and limiting to intimate and open communication; they metaphorically—and to an extreme degree—play out the limitations that Turkle and Lanier see as inevitable when communicating through technological devices. They offer an analogy for the present day, and give the reassuring suggestion that face-to-face communication is, undoubtedly, superior to communication via technology.

### **Virtual vs bodily experience**

However, with Buse and Stott's arguments in mind, a significant part of Sherry Turkle's concerns about 'virtual intimacy' is also linked to a sense of the virtual as spectral. This is observable in the dehumanising disembodiment that Turkle sees as occurring with any non-face-to-face communication; her emphasis on the face itself already demonstrates her assumption of the necessity of the *body* as a fundamental presence in these superior in-person communications and intimacies. Steampunk characters are surrounded by technology, but rather than relying upon that technology to enable and develop their relationships, they focus much more heavily on their face-to-face and physical contact with each other. They resist the spectralisation that is perceived to be tied up in virtual communications by an emphatic insistence upon the human *body*, as well as insisting on the solidity of their technology. While spectrality—including in its Derridean sense, focused on the ghost of Hamlet's father—is not necessarily disembodied, and can, as discussed in chapter three, have 'matter', popular understandings of ghostliness are often linked to the non-corporeal spirit. This, alongside Turkle's and Lanier's fears about the disembodiment of non-face-to-face contact, is the kind of spectrality to which steampunk responds, to an unfocused anxiety of the loss of bodily substance in the technological present. Alexia's relationship with Conall (the werewolf who will later

become her husband) in *Soulless*, for example, begins with (face-to-face) verbal sparring, which develops into emotional intimacy, and progresses over the course of the narrative to kissing and intimate physical contact, and—after their marriage—to sex. At no point in the whole narrative do they communicate in any way other than face-to-face, and they come to rely heavily on entirely non-verbal, physical communication and intimacy. Carriger emphasises the bodily aspects of the characters' developing relationship, which acts as a telling counterpoint to the potentially spectralising, disembodiment effects of technology. The limited potential of the aethographic transmitter works to prioritise face-to-face intimacy, as discussed, but the delight taken in physical pleasure in Alexia and Conall's interactions participates, more subtly, in a similar discourse, only visible because of the nature of the technology that the narrative has explored elsewhere.

For example, the couple's first kiss is covered in such detail as to require several pages of description of what physically occurs for both of them, including:

The kiss itself was initially quite gentle: slow and soft. Alexia found it surprising given the violence of his embrace. She also found it faintly unsatisfying. She gave a little murmur of frustration and leaned in toward him. Then the kiss changed. It became harder, rougher, parting her lips with purpose. There was, shockingly, tongue involved in the proceedings. [...] Miss Tarabotti knew instantly that she adored the sensation. She leaned into him even more, too lost in the gathering feelings [...] (Carriger 2009: 91-92)

This description not only gives a remarkable amount of detail about the kiss itself, it also demonstrates that there is non-verbal communication between the two participants. Alexia's 'little murmur' and her leaning towards Conall express enthusiasm. Even when they stop kissing, Alexia's physical response continues to be a source of surprise to her: 'Her heart was doing crazy things and she still could not locate her kneecaps' (Carriger 2009: 94). Everything about the descriptions of sexual contact in this text (this is just one of many) indicates the significance and the pleasure, for Alexia, of being physically intimate with another person. Although this is not one of steampunk's many young adult novels, there is a sharp contrast here to what Turkle describes as young adult 'love stories in which full intimacy cannot occur—here I think of current passions for films and novels about high school vampires who cannot sexually consummate relationships for fear of hurting those they love' (Turkle 2011: 10). She sees this resistance to 'full intimacy'—physical and face-to-face intimacy—as a consequence of teenagers' investment in virtual communications. Sexual contact is very evidently desirable in *Soulless* (and the rest of the

series), however. Alexia is surrounded by technology, but that technology does not alter the need for and pleasure in physical contact with Conall. Resisting a version of a technological world in which technology ‘degrades’ or limits communication through non-technological means, Carriger emphasises the pleasure of bodies and physical, face-to-face intimacy. Steampunk encounters reinforce physical intimacy and communication over the spectrally virtual. My analysis does not suggest that the body *is* distinct from technology, but demonstrates the ways in which steampunk seeks to separate the human body and its experiences from the potentially spectralising effects of the technology around it.

The physicality of bodies is important in steampunk, not just for sexual intimacy, but also in the visceral violence that is often enacted in these texts; this again works to stress the *bodily* aspects of human existence, over the spectral. In *The Strange Affair of Spring-Heeled Jack*, Richard Burton, the protagonist, has been on the trail of a violent murderer and he comes upon the following:

[Burton] wiped his mouth with his sleeve and looked again at the ripped and shredded intestines and organs that were spread messily across the cobbles. His eyes followed their long bloody trail, past the outspread legs, across the torn thigh with its bone glinting wetly in the lamplight, and into the hollowed out ribcage. Above tattered scraps of coat and shirt and skin, the glazed eyes of Montague Penniforth stared up through the fog at whatever lay beyond. (Hodder 2010: 146)

Again, we can observe the recurrent tendency in steampunk texts to give extensive detail. As with Alexia and Conall’s kiss, the detail here about the human body parallels the extensive detail about the velocipede in the description earlier, suggesting that the human body is worthy of just as much investigation and analysis as any technological invention. This gory and visceral image emphasises the physical side of human existence (again over the virtual). Disturbing and horrifying where *Soulless*’s kiss is charming and amusing, both descriptions emphasise that, whatever technology exists in these worlds, the living and dead bodies that populate them are also essential, viscerally and emphatically present. Steampunk, then, implies that the human body—for all its fallibility—cannot be mediated or improved on by technology, nor does it participate in a spectralising discourse that may be read as integral to a life around technology.

Tim Armstrong (1998: 3) argues that ‘Modernity, then, brings both a fragmentation and augmentation of the body in relation to technology; it offers the body as lack, at the

same time as it offers technological compensation'. Armstrong's overall argument revolves around the development of modernism in relation to technology and its relationship to bodies. Making a broad statement about 'modernity', Armstrong highlights the ways in which bodies might be read as being 'augmented' by the prosthetic, bodily application of technology, even as the bodies themselves are read as being denigrated by it. This raises arguments about the relationship between prosthetics and literature, which there is insufficient space to cover in detail here. Armstrong (1998: 78) distinguishes between a perceived 'negative' and a 'positive' prosthetics; the former is compensatory, replacing a lack, the latter is a more expansive and 'utopian' version, in which human capacities are expanded by technology. Briefly following this paradigm indicates that steampunk has a firmly 'negative' relationship to prosthetics, in that it frequently represents the prosthetic linking of bodies with technology—even in compensatory form, to heal—as a profoundly dangerous act. In *Spring-Heeled Jack*, those bodies that are in too intimate a connection with technology are profoundly disturbing:

The most famous and successful engineer in the world, if this was truly Brunel, was no longer the short, dark-haired, cigar-chomping man of memory.

He stood on three triple-jointed metal legs. These were attached to a horizontal disk-shaped chassis, affixed to the bottom of the main body, which, shaped like a barrel laying on its side, appeared to be constructed from wood and banded with strips of studded brass. There were domed protrusions at either end of it, each bearing nine multi-jointed arms, each arm ending in a different tool, ranging from delicate fingers to slashing blades, drills to hammers, spanners to welders. [...]

Amid all the electrical machinery, this great steaming hulk seemed strangely primitive. (Hodder 2010: 270)

As well as this dramatic and fundamentally technological image of his weaponised body, Brunel also now only communicates through a strange bell-ringing, whistling sound and is thus largely incomprehensible unless someone who understands his noises is able to translate for him. Hodder thus gives the strong impression with this description of Brunel (and throughout his novel) that to tamper with the human body and consciousness using technology is to distort and damage it beyond recognition; this is clearly a negative, compensatory prosthetics, taken to unsettling extremes. Brunel is literally 'no longer' the same man. The use of the word 'primitive' also oddly suggests that too intimate a connection between the body and technology is actually fundamentally regressive. This implies a backward movement towards primitivism, counter to the linear trajectory in

which technology seemed to participate above (and it has important links to the destructive logic of atavism raised by Valerie Rohy 2009: x). However, anachronic or otherwise, Hodder's image of Brunel continues to emphasise a much more conservative politics in relation to fears about the relationship between the body and technology; these prosthetics are alienating in their effects.

This links to cyborg theory, and to Donna Haraway's (1991) work in 'A Cyborg Manifesto' in the 1980s. Haraway criticised essentialist identity politics via the image of the late-twentieth-century cyborg, whose connection with technology could be both literal—as in this Brunel example—and metaphorical—as in Turkle's and Lanier's images of individuals failing to communicate from behind screens. Haraway also argues that all identity and selfhood is constructed and is, therefore, a form of cyborg technology in its own right. Her theories are more expansive than this brief summary suggests, and they have been modified both by herself and by other theorists in recent years (see Haraway 2004). This cyborgian principle has become the unspoken foundation for a range of twenty-first-century politics, especially in relation to theories about the constructed nature of identity. However, even with the various developments in Haraway's theories since their inception, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' warrants acknowledgement as a formative text for thinking about the ways our bodies are prostheticised by technology—including in the manifesto's positioning of language as a technology of power.

In raising Haraway, I do not mean to suggest that *Spring-Heeled Jack* directly engages with these challenging theories of cyborg-isation; it does not address the process of becoming-cyborg which we might argue takes place in a relationship to technology, or in the formation of identity. None of the steampunk texts I analyse here are addressing this challenging discursive position. However, in this image of cyborg-Brunel, there is an anxiety connected to Haraway's theories, about whether identity can be sustained through, during, and as part of, a relationship to technology. Jaron Lanier (2010: 5-6) writes: 'We make up extensions to your being, like remote eyes and ears (web-cams and mobile phones) and expanded memory (the world of details you can search for online) [...] These structures in turn can change how you conceive of yourself and the world'. This also speaks to Nicholas Carr's overall thesis in *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* (2010: 6), when he argues that the internet has come to 'shape the process of thought' in very specific ways. He argues that we have come to receive internet-mediated information in 'short, disjointed, overlapping bursts—the faster the better', and so this is how we have come to think. In the works of these theorists, so



concerned about the impact of technology on humans (again, emphatically separating the two into firmly distinct categories), this process of becoming-cyborg, of becoming inextricably linked to technology in our minds, if not literally, is dangerously altering to human existence. This is the discourse in which these steampunk cyborgs, in part, participate. Brunel is ‘no longer the [...] man of memory’, because of his integrated relationship to technology. (It is tempting to read that description of him as a ‘man of memory’ as connected to Carr’s view of how the internet is changing and limiting our capacity for memory, but this may be too much of a stretch.) Brunel’s identity has been irretrievably altered by his own (literal and advanced) cyborg-isation. Again, Carr’s and Lanier’s articulations of a particular set of contemporary concerns about technology are only one of the discourses in which steampunk works. The joy and fun of technology is meaningful throughout these novels too. These texts do, however, work within a complex and potentially reactionary discourse, persistently proposing that huge threats are posed by a relationship with technology, and prioritising the human body itself over any cyborg-ised version of it.

We can see discursively connected anxieties about humans and their relationship to technology in more mainstream outlets too. A 2014 BBC online article had the title ‘Singularity: The robots are coming to steal our jobs’ (Wakefield 2014). Appropriating the frequently used anti-immigration rhetoric of ‘stealing *our* jobs’, the article’s headline sets up a very deliberate ‘us vs them’ mentality in its relationship to robotics. This language, and its associations with a politics of isolationism, is revealing in the 2014 context of the rise of UKIP’s popularity in Britain, and the then unknown and unanticipated Brexit vote. The phrasing of this headline places the article in a deliberately conservative field, associating itself with an assumed defensive position against a form of ‘invasion’. UKIP’s anti-immigration is this article’s anti-robotics. In the article, lines that imply the benefits of robotics—‘We may get to put our feet up more, for a start’—are contradicted by this ongoing semantic field of invasion—‘the onslaught of artificial intelligence’, ‘society dominated by machine intelligence’, ‘the rise of the robots’, ‘humans will eventually be eliminated from the decision chain entirely’.

In steampunk, many ‘jobs’ are done by automata, or by machines of some kind, speaking, in part, to our knowledge of the early phases of the machine age (in which many of these texts are set). Indeed, in the *Burton and Swinburne* series, the Luddites represent a serious political force, and their name draws attention to a historical political rebellion that also pushed against machines for ‘stealing our jobs’. However, more broadly in these

steampunk novels, advanced technology is clearly accepted by characters, as it assists them in performing tasks. In the *Steampunk Chronicles*, protagonist Finley's family run a bookshop. They have an 'automaton assistant, Fanny', who 'was a little shorter than Finley, but had arms and legs that could lengthen if needed. She was programmed to do menial tasks around the shop—such as dusting and shelving books' (Cross 2012: 16). As an independent automaton, Fanny does not propose the same prostheticised post-human risks as Brunel above. The emphasis is on Fanny's doing '*menial*' work, perhaps thereby evading the implication that she might take away jobs. (The class-based implications of this for potential employees who might otherwise do that 'menial' work go unmentioned; steampunk texts in general have a troubled relationship to class, often proudly focusing on exclusionary and prejudiced aristocrats.) In this respect, then, steampunk novels tend to resist this particular form of contemporary popular and politically isolationist politics about robotics. They do not suggest that technology developed to perform relatively simple tasks is a threat.

However, steampunk certainly *is* quite ambivalent about automata and about any artificial intelligence that surpasses the simplicity of Fanny who 'had no voice box' and is a 'skeletal machine' (Cross 2012: 16). Sherry Turkle's work is implicitly positioned in opposition to Haraway's, and she suggests that we are currently on the precipice of the 'robotic moment', meaning that we—i.e. the global population—are increasingly prepared to accept robots into our lives in the imminent future. She gives numerous examples of human-robot intimacy, such as the PARO therapeutic robot, a toy seal that responds to touch and speech. PARO is currently most commonly (and often successfully) used to help people with dementia. The robot can help with managing patient's anxieties, sometimes avoiding the need for chemical medications, or can be used more generally as support for patients' care (Griffiths 2014; Bemelmans et al 2015). However, Turkle's (2011: 84) representation of robotics like PARO is again worried about emotional intimacy: 'We don't seem to care what these artificial intelligences "know" or "understand" of the human moments we might "share" with them. At the robotic moment, the performance of connection seems connection enough'. There are obvious questions here to be raised with regard to the 'performance of connection': aren't all connections in some way performances, or, at the very least, performative? An emotional connection cannot be tangibly encountered, and another person's consciousness can only be accessed through their chosen speeches and actions. We might even go so far as to suggest, in a Derridean vein, that all such emotional 'connections' are therefore spectral.

Turkle's views are again structured by an insistent desire to denigrate technology, as she asserts her view of the ethical and interpersonal superiority of human-to-human contact. Such a technology-focused view can actually circumscribe a wider awareness of the complications of the emotional connections she describes.

However, again, Turkle's voice (chiming with Carr's and Lanier's), in all of its reactionary terms, helps to identify a particular way of reading technology in the twenty-first century. Focusing on the robotic aspect of this quotation, according to Turkle, society is prepared to accept the presence of robots; we are, she suggests, content with their ability to 'perform' emotional connection, and relieved—harking back to her point on communications technology above—to not necessarily have to respond to the demands of human intimacy ourselves. She does not suggest that 'companionate robots are [currently] common amongst us', but refers instead to 'our state of emotional—and I would say philosophical readiness' to accept them into our lives (Turkle 2011: 9). This assumed public enthusiasm for and comfort with robotics, however, is belied by the anti-robotics conservatism of the BBC article above and by the frequent distaste for technologically advanced automata in steampunk fiction—often a big step forward from the simplicity of Fanny and the mother's helper. Steampunk villains often perform their nefarious deeds using artificial intelligence and robotics, through which steampunk manifests a contradictory anxiety about artificial intelligence, robotics, and other, mostly human-shaped, physical embodiments of technology.

In *The Girl in the Steel Corset*, for example, a man nicknamed 'The Machinist' creates an army of automata, including an automaton that is 'the very image of Her Majesty right down to the flesh that glowed with vitality', with which he intends to replace the real Queen Victoria and thus rule the British empire for himself (Cross 2012: 450). (Evidently, in terms of 'stealing jobs', this automaton has set its sights high!) The commitment to empire in these texts is a strange and problematic issue that frequently recurs, as do racism, classism, homophobia, and misogyny. Some steampunk texts work hard to resist these troubling narratives (e.g. the *Parasol Protectorate's* resistance to stereotypical gender relations and restrictive heteronormative familial structures [see Harris 2016]), but still demonstrate oddly regressive attitudes to other issues (e.g. the *Parasol Protectorate's* problematic and deeply troubling representations of class and race). However, I am focusing on the relationship specifically to technology here. In the final battle with 'The Machinist's army of multiple automata in *The Girl in the Steel Corset*, the typical steampunk violence recurs:

[...] the first machine she grabbed had a headlike attachment lit from within. She tore that from the metal shoulders and threw it to the floor where Sam stomped it with his heavy boot, crushing it like a vegetable tin. Then, she reached into the chest cavity, grabbed hold of as many wires and guts as she could and pulled. The light in the thing's chest sputtered and died as the machine fell to the floor. (Cross 2012: 452)

There is a noticeable similarity between Montague Penniforth's 'hollowed out ribcage' and the way that Finley empties out the 'chest cavity' of the automaton, not least because of the use of the word 'guts' to describe the wires inside it and the fact that the light in it 'died'. But this is the limit to any description of the automaton as living or conscious. It is described as a 'machine' and, even more de-humanisingly, as 'the thing', and its head is seen to have no more potential for interaction with the world than a 'vegetable tin'.

This representation of automata as emphatically non-human again has much in common with the humanist discourse that works to formulate sharp distinctions between the human individual and the technology around them. In Lanier's preface to *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (2010: ix), another title that wears its stance on the distinction between humans and technology firmly on its sleeve, he writes: 'It's early in the twenty-first century, and that means that these words will mostly be read by nonpersons—automatons or numb mobs composed of people who are no longer acting as individuals'. Lanier articulates an alarmist image of a frightening future of lost individuality and fundamentally mediated existence—the preface goes on to assume that his text will be persistently consumed by search engines and algorithms, and that 'Real human eyes will read these words in only a tiny minority of the cases' (Lanier 2010: xi). The potential for humans to be replaced by such automata (not necessarily human-shaped, as in the *Steel Corset* example, but with artificially intelligent capacities), to be pushed aside by their mediated existence, is evidently a source of great anxiety for Lanier. However, steampunk, with its conservative resolutions of anxieties about both the present and the future, suggests that this anxiety is unnecessary. The 'vegetable tin' of the automaton is clearly no match for the interpersonal teamwork of the humans; humanity wins over automata, not the other way around.

Turkle's (2011: 44, 28) empirical research on human interaction with robots reveals that children often believe that 'a robot with a body can get hurt' and that sociable robots are 'alive enough'; this latter phrase, taken up and analysed in detail by Turkle, does not imply that the children think that the robots are biologically alive, but that they are alive

with respect to interaction, relationality, and their ability to ‘perform’ emotional connections with humans. Whether in reactionary denial of this or as a suggestion that it is mistaken, steampunk fiction very firmly asserts the opposite. These robots are not alive at all. In *Soulless* the ‘monstrosity’ automaton that attacks Alexia is defeated:

Its skin began melting away in slow rivulets, like warm honey. Slow black blood, mixed with some black particulate matter, leaked out and intermingled with the skin substance. Both slid off a mechanical skeletal structure. Soon, all that was left of the automaton was a metal frame wearing shabby clothing and lying in a gooey puddle of old blood, wax, and small black particles. Its internal organs appeared to be all gears and clockwork mechanisms. (Carriger 2009: 322-323)

This time, in a remarkable difference to the bloody image of Montague Penniforth’s death, the detritus from this automaton’s demise is very obviously not human. The old, black blood indicates that this object was not living in a typically human sense, and the ‘gears and clockwork mechanisms’ that remain are very clearly machine, not ‘living’ thing. There is no death in this image, no mention of a transition from being functional to being inert—clearly, this automaton is not ‘alive enough’ even to die. It would also be possible to read here an outlet for a kind of ‘acceptable’ violence, in that this is violence without negative human consequences.

In general, then, violence against automata further emphasises that steampunk responds to and comfortingly soothes concerns about the present day, like Turkle’s, Lanier’s, and those implied by the BBC article. If robots are accepted into society, suggests steampunk, we do not need to feel concerned about the potential loss of person-person intimacy that Turkle suggests it will bring with it. We may be ‘poised to attach to the inanimate without prejudice’ (Turkle 2011: 10), but being poised on the brink, suggest steampunk texts, does not mean it will necessarily happen the way some people fear. Steampunk robots and the way characters respond to them firmly suggest that the ‘robotic moment’ is, ultimately, an impossibility, rather than being universally accepted as Turkle implies. These texts also offer reassurance that robots are not going to ‘steal our jobs’; they are too fragile, too emotionless, too non-human to be a threat in this respect—either that, or their capacities are just too limited. Steampunk resists the idea that technology does and must dominate our present-day culture, exploring, through entirely imaginary technology, different ways that humans might relate to it and to each other without it. Robots, it asserts, are not alive as much as humans are, and spectral technological communication is no substitute for the intimacy and visceral nature of human bodies.

### **Conclusion: Giving bodies back to ghosts**

This chapter has positioned steampunk as the extreme extent of the neo-historical aesthetic, in that it takes the principles that I have established are at the heart of neo-historicism and pushes them beyond the parameters that I had previously discussed. Steampunk is one neo-historical field in which the post-postmodern anxieties of the present are played out and comfortingly resolved in relation to technology and technological change. So, for example, I have looked at how steampunk automata in these historical texts reassure readers that robots are not an imminent threat either to social interaction or to ‘our jobs’—to life as we currently understand it. Similarly, I have demonstrated how social interaction—via the work of Sherry Turkle and Jaron Lanier—is at the heart of many contemporary anxieties about technological change: the fear that intimacies via telecommunications media, social media, virtual reality, etc, will ultimately come to degrade our ability to engage in face-to-face intimacy. Again, these steampunk narratives work to reassure us about this, in the ways in which they suggest the superiority of human, bodily contact over the limitations it portrays as inherent to communications technology. Technology (and communications technology in particular) fails these characters, while their experiences of their bodies—whether in pleasure or in pain—are more dependable, visceral, and intense. These texts therefore prioritise human, bodily contact over flawed communication through technology—a metaphor for the perceived limitations of technological devices.

These reassuring narratives are set in the Victorian period for a number of reasons. Clockwork and steam power are also associated with nineteenth-century aesthetics (whether accurately or, more often, not), and they offer a reassuring solidity to technology that helps it to resist some of the twenty-first-century problems of feared spectralisation and assumed interpersonal distance. That these nineteenth-century settings are the source for steampunk technology is also partly a consequence of a wider current preoccupation with the Victorian period, as discussed in my previous chapter with regard to neo-Victorianism, and as documented by theorists such as Cora Kaplan (2007) and exhibitions such as ‘Victoriana: The Art of Revival’ (Guildhall Art Gallery 2013). As I have previously discussed, while neo-Victorianism fetishises one specific era, it is a participant in the neo-historical aesthetic. The aesthetics of the nineteenth century, even in their most flamboyantly anachronistic sense, have been pushed to extremes in the steampunk

aesthetic, with nineteenth-century-ish corsets, bustles, and hats forming significant aspects of the characters' appearances and lives. Plus, a glance at photographs from the steampunk conventions mentioned previously, demonstrates the extreme versions of Victorian fashions that are part of steampunk cosplay. The bizarre and amusing hats in the *Parasol Protectorate* certainly warrant a mention too, if only for the sheer extremes that Carriger achieves; she also appropriates a parasol as an anti-supernatural and anti-clockwork weapon—this is the parasol of the 'Parasol Protectorate', the secret (sort of) society after which the series is named (see, for example, Carriger 2010b: 98).

Neo-Victorianism and steampunk should not be confused with each other; the former is more plausible, still deploying anachronisms to political effect, but with none of the obviousness and implausibility of steampunk technology. In steampunk, it is not exclusively the technology of the Victorian period that is reimagined far beyond its original boundaries, but also nineteenth century clothing, social etiquette, wider culture, and, sometimes, politics.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this fetishisation of Victorian social mores also has some bearing on the tongue-in-cheek classism in the *Parasol Protectorate* series; Carriger (2009: 298) jokes in her author's note that 'absurd Victorian manners and ridiculous fashions were obviously dictated by vampires', which implies a desire to find an explanation, even a clearly implausible, imagined one, for a form of social interaction that feels so far removed from the present day. Carriger (for example, 2010a: 189) provides some entertaining parodies and revisions of such social etiquette, including in her suggestion that these vampiric social norms suit the needs of the female-led vampire society.

Beyond a playful relationship to the Victorians, however, if equivalent robotic technology to that observed in steampunk were played out to these extents in narratives set in the present day, or in the near future (as it frequently is; e.g. Asimov 1952; Dick 1969; Scott 1982; Proyas 2004; Villeneuve 2017), the content would seem much more like a suggestion of a real, possible future. In steampunk, however, we know that this is not what *did* happen in the past. The implausibility of the narratives of steampunk offers reassurance through its distance from the known past, as it is very obvious that what we are observing here is *not* a possible reality. The very implausibility of steampunk, a clear consequence of its past setting and its distance from our reality, is what gives it such great narrative and metaphorical power to exorcise anxieties about technology.

The steampunk aesthetic also relies on being anachronistic, a participant in the neo-historical aesthetic, even though steampunk's origins precede the development of a more

post-postmodern neo-historical imagining of the past. Steampunk shares with the neo-historical aesthetic its manipulations of its historical settings, inserting excessively implausible and anachronistic technology into explicitly fictional narratives set in the nineteenth century. This is another reason these texts set in the past are so relevant: they participate in disruptions to our ideas of what the past can and does look like when presented to us in imaginative narrative form. Steampunk's neo-historical anachronisms are so extreme, however, as to make its textual manifestations distinctly different from other neo-historical texts. The novels and films I have discussed previously have proposed new ways of *doing* history through spectrally haunted texts, and through historical settings that are broadly coherent representations of the past, but that are troubled by spectral ontologies and neo-historical anachronisms. Steampunk instead makes its historical settings implausible playgrounds for contemporary anxieties, testing their boundaries and offering solutions to them.

This chapter has used steampunk as a case study to understand what happens when the neo-historical aesthetic is pushed to its extremes, when anachronisms become so absurdist as to offer completely divergent versions of the past, too far removed from the 'real' past—as we understand it—to be plausible. But this case study is also linked to Derrida's spectres, to a relationship to the past in the twenty-first century that is configured through and with a relationship to spectrality. This extreme extent of steampunk anachronisms pushes steampunk into differently playful and strategically *implausible* territory, in which it works to re-solidify and re-embody the (not always but often) disembodied ghostly ontological gap that other neo-historical texts—such as those discussed in the previous chapter, as well as *Sixty Lights*—have worked to open. With spaces in the real/not real opened up in the spectral anachronisms of the neo-historical aesthetic, pushing this process to its limits reveals a profound anxiety about such ontological uncertainty. Steampunk instead pursues a politics of re-embodiment, which is not an inevitable reaction against spectrality, but which speaks to its non-material, non-corporeal associations. This is manifested in the literary focus on a reconnection with the solid and visceral experiences of bodies, whether through sexual intimacy or physical violence. This contemporary anxiety about spectrality connects with the steampunk approach to contemporary technology, addressing anxieties around virtual communications and connections—as in Sherry Turkle's and Peter Buse and Andrew Stott's work. Such technologies are read as having a *spectralising* effect, and as such steampunk prioritises face-to-face intimacies and emphasises the failures of such



technologies as a conservative reaction against their spectralisation. Ultimately, where, in its more measured manifestations, the neo-historical aesthetic proposes a radically spectralised narrative space as the locus for a new kind of fictionalised history, steampunk pushes this into a panicked re-embodiment and re-entrenchment of physicalised normativity.

As two steampunk characters (Briar and Zeke in *Boneshaker*) argue:

‘You’re asking for trouble, trying to rewrite history, trying to shuffle things around until they mean something better.’

‘I’m not trying to rewrite anything! [...] I’m only trying to make it right!’ (Priest 2009: 38)

This is an accurate description of what steampunk technology seeks to do: to rewrite history (Zeke’s protestations that this is *not* what he is doing are naively false) in order to ‘make right’ the problems of the present, and especially anxieties about twenty-first-century technological change and fears of a concordant spectralised dissociation from the body or from other people. For any contemporary concern about technology, steampunk will post-postmodernly ‘make it right’, regardless of the troubled implications of this. Its solid, implausible technologies and damaged or impassioned bodies effectively *de*-spectralise those uncertain real/not-real spaces described in the previous chapter, and which the neo-historical aesthetic inhabits. Pushing the neo-historical aesthetic to its extremes of anachronistic invention in texts, in the case of steampunk, actually changes it dramatically from a spectralised aesthetic focused on ontological uncertainty with queer political potential to a pursuit of re-embodiment with the goal being to ‘make it right’. Clockwork, then, really does ring alarm bells.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The Parasol Protectorate series comprises: *Soulless* (2009), *Changeless* (2010), *Blameless* (2010), *Heartless* (2011), and *Timeless* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Jeff VanderMeer’s (2011: 9) tongue-in-cheek formula for any steampunk work suggests: ‘STEAMPUNK = Mad Scientist Inventor [invention (steam × airship or metal man / baroque stylings) × (pseudo) Victorian setting] + progressive or reactionary politics × adventure plot’. This formula does not actually apply to many steampunk works, but the suggestion of the omnipresence of a ‘mad inventor’ is quite accurate. For more inventors, mad or otherwise, outside of the books discussed in this chapter (which also all contain

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inventors), see, for example, der Grimnebulin in China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000) and any number of characters in Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's *Steampunk* (2008).

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned, dirigibles can be seen in almost all steampunk works, and certainly all of those that I look at in this chapter. The predominance of this is intriguing; it could perhaps be the consequence of a fascination with the scale of dirigibles, or a more general attraction to air travel.

<sup>4</sup> The Burton and Swinburne series is as follows: *The Strange Affair of Spring-Heeled Jack* (2010), *The Curious Case of the Clockwork Man* (2011), *Expedition to the Mountains of the Moon* (2012), *The Secret of Abdu El-Yezdi* (2014), *The Return of the Discontinued Man* (2015), and *The Rise of the Automated Aristocrats* (2015). The first three titles technically begin with Burton and Swinburne in... The latter three titles have the subheading A Burton and Swinburne Adventure.

<sup>5</sup> Future: Stephenson (1995); present: Roberts (2008); past: those texts discussed in this chapter; alternate universe: Miéville (2000).

<sup>6</sup> For example, there was a long list of 'vendors' at the Steampunk World's Fair in Piscataway, NJ, in 2013, and at the International Steampunk City in Morristown, NJ. There were also 'hands-on experiment-based workshops' for creating your own steampunk objects. For more on steampunk's DIY culture and cosplay, see Grymme (2011) and VanderMeer (2011). For more on the twenty-first-century developments and increased interest in cosplay beyond just its steampunk connections, see Stoker (2010).

<sup>7</sup> The series comprises *Boneshaker* (2009), *Dreadnought* (2010), *Ganymede* (2011), *The Inexplicables* (2012), *Fiddlehead* (2013), and *Jacaranda* (2016). Novellas *Clementine* (2010) and *Tanglefoot* (2011) are thought of as instalments '1.1' and '1.2' respectively. As all of these long series suggest, steampunk authors tend to be quite prolific, and rapidly so.

<sup>8</sup> See Jerome de Groot (2016: 126) on the conspicuous absence of zombies from historical fiction.

<sup>9</sup> Although, extending even beyond the steampunk DIY culture, several people have, in recent years, built entirely functional steam-powered bicycles. See for example Siciliano (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Thanks go to my colleague Sam Cutting at the University of Brighton for his helpful support in developing my thoughts on technology and its discursive relationship to humanity in the twenty-first century, as discussed in particular in these two paragraphs, but also throughout this chapter.

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<sup>11</sup> The Steampunk Chronicles series comprises: *The Girl in the Steel Corset* (2011), *The Girl in the Clockwork Collar* (2012), *The Girl with the Iron Touch* (2013), and *The Girl with the Windup Heart* (2014). *The Strange Case of Finley Jayne* (2011) is understood to be number 0.5 in the series, *The Dark Discovery of Jack Dandy* (2013) is 2.5, and *The Wild Adventure of Jasper Renn* (2013) is 3.5.

<sup>12</sup> In terms of wider cultural products, there is, for example, Mark Hodder's (2011: 15) appropriation of and alterations to Algernon Swinburne's poetry. Hodder is also the most obvious distorter of politics, such as with his gross exaggeration of the Victorian dandy in the 'Rake' social and political faction (2011: 124).

## **Conclusion**

For her part, Cora blamed the people who wrote it down. People always got things wrong, on purpose as much as by accident.

Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (2016: 182)

This thesis has defined a twenty-first-century, post-postmodern literary aesthetic, in which the radical deconstructions of historical narrative in postmodernism come to be both embraced and resisted by some fictional narratives set in the past. In a range of historical fictional texts, what I have called ‘the neo-historical aesthetic’ appears to varying degrees. These novels and films imagine new versions of the past and deconstruct the possibility of accessing that past through narrative, even whilst committing to coherent and accessible narrative itself. This is made visible through anachronistic features—whether entirely anachronistic, or having different meanings in the past and in the present—which knowingly gesture towards the inevitably subjectively influenced process of writing historical narrative, and which imagine new versions of the past through this. Those versions of the past often work to imaginatively ‘fill the gaps’ of traditional history in some respect, which can have its own teleological problems. However, the narratives also persistently, neo-historically, emphasise that they are fictional, explicitly influenced by the moment of their creation. This is not the postmodern collapse of historiographic metafiction, in which fictions dramatise the impossibility of narrative, persistently pulled back into their own presentism, and into the narrative lacunas that are an inextricable part of that. It is instead an effort to restabilise narrative, to find new ways of doing history by forming self-contradictory, fictional pasts. Visible in this is a new kind of, explicitly inaccurate, ‘authenticity’, produced through a sometimes challengingly spectral and achronological process, but that takes place within accessible, middlebrow novels and films.

Chapter one established the terms of my argument, offering an interpretation of post-postmodernism, in which the ongoing structures of post-late capitalism (or neoliberal capitalism) have produced an exhausted relationship to postmodernism. Reading Fredric Jameson, Jeffrey T. Nealon, and others, I argued that in that relationship, we have both come to accept the terms of postmodernism and, simultaneously, to resist them, seeking to return to a moment before them. The focus in this thesis has been on this acceptance and resistance, particularly in relation to postmodern deconstructions of history and its

accessibility in narrative, which have not inhibited a contemporary commitment to narrative. Awareness that narrative is inevitably inflected by its author is a central feature of the neo-historical aesthetic. However, rather than being deconstructed by it, chapter one showed how such present-day concerns are anachronistically present in neo-historical texts, but less disruptively than in postmodern texts like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). This was revealed by the anachronisms of *Life Mask* (2001) and *The Underground Railroad* (2016), and in Thomas Cromwell's resistance to being narrativised in *Wolf Hall* (2009). Exploring changing definitions of 'authenticity' in the context of twenty-first-century social media and commodity culture, such as in #liveauthentic, this chapter established the neo-historical aesthetic as a newly 'authentic', self-contradictory historical mode, suitable to the self-contradictions of post-postmodernism.

Chapter two argued that the locus of this post-postmodern acceptance of and resistance to postmodern deconstructions of narrative is—at least in its neo-historical sense—most prominently found in middlebrow texts. This became clear through an analysis of Sarah Waters's middlebrow novels *The Night Watch* (2006) and *The Paying Guests* (2014), exploring the ways in which they participated, again to varying degrees, in definitions of the middlebrow. The terms of the middlebrow have been established by Nicola Humble in relation to the 1920s and Beth Driscoll in relation to contemporary fiction, among others. Following them in reading the middlebrow as definitively 'in between', the chapter asserted that, in Waters's novels, the middlebrow functions as a resistance to 'difficult' highbrow fiction and to certain lowbrow romance structures. This emphasised the importance of the neo-historical aesthetic being in *accessible* narratives, but ones that require a certain, limited degree of engagement and interpretation from their readers (whose potential middle-class cultural capital informs their reading practices). To facilitate this interpretable legibility, Waters offers a conspicuous set of literary tropes, what I have called her 'literariness'. However, even within this accessibility, these novels demonstrate that neo-historical narratives still adhere, in some ways, to a kind of middlebrow conservatism. Such conservatism can circumscribe the neo-historical aesthetic to a representation of middle-class politics. I argued this through a consideration of Sarah Waters's explicitly fictional, postmodern-aware lesbian histories in *The Paying Guests*, which come to be confined to what Lauren Berlant describes as the 'intimate publics' of middlebrow reading cultures.

Chapter three built on these ideas of middlebrow in-betweenness, by considering the comparable ontological in-betweenness of ghosts, and by arguing that the structure of

haunting is integral to the neo-historical aesthetic. Ghosts are, in Derridean terms, non-chronological anachronisms ('the time is out of joint'), being both returns from the past and anticipated in the future, and an analysis of *Dark Matter* (2010) revealed the neo-historical implications of this. As such, this chapter argued that ghosts are a productive structural metaphor and critical tool for interpreting the cross-period neo-historical aesthetic, which brings together past, present, and future in explicitly imaginary versions of the past. This interpretation grew out of *The Others* (2001), in which the apparently 'present' characters, are, in the end, revealed to be haunting spectres lingering after their deaths, and who end the film gesturing towards a future of achronological hauntings. The achronology of ghosts also enables a logical structure wherein the pre-postmodern (a word used to refer to a somewhat ambivalent desire to return to a non-specific moment *before* postmodernism) and the postmodern can be brought together in the structure of haunted post-postmodernism. Relationships to texts in *The Others* suggest this; characters follow a spectralising process of interpretation as they manage factuality and fictionality in what they read. Plausibility is also an issue here, and *The Awakening* (2011) tests the boundaries of the plausible, using haunting to suggest the impossibility of being certain about 'truth'. Concurrent work to the neo-historical aesthetic, including neo-Victorianism and the Gothic, was informative in this analysis. Also through Derrida and the work of Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, I argued that haunting offers a real/not-real uncertainty, in which the postmodern problems of historical narrative can be managed through the explicit, haunting presence of the present day in narratives set in the past. Such hauntings occur through the knowing interpretive action that is required by an anachronism or by proleptic irony. To expand on this, I used examples from *Tipping the Velvet* (1999), in which the word 'queer' is inevitably haunted by its present-day interpretations, and returned to *Wolf Hall* to consider how Mantel plays with her readers' present-day knowledge about the characters' futures. The chapter concluded with a gesture to alternative queer possibilities for the neo-historical aesthetic, through a consideration of its potential resistance to 'straight time' and the works of Elizabeth Freeman and Valerie Rohy.

Chapter four took a slightly different approach to the others, in that, having defined the neo-historical aesthetic—self-contradictory, post-postmodern, middlebrow, haunted—I then examined steampunk, a literary (and wider cultural) field, in which that aesthetic is pushed to an extreme. The extreme anachronisms of steampunk technology mean that the narratives diverge to a much greater extent from 'known' traditional history. These historical fantasies, counterfactual in many cases, process and address many

contemporary anxieties about technology. This chapter thus explored how steampunk extends the neo-historical aesthetic beyond the boundaries of plausibility, with technology such as that in Gail Carriger's *Parasol Protectorate* series (2009-2012) and Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker* (2009), contrasted with the more plausible neo-historical effects of *Sixty Lights* (2004). These steampunk technologies resolve anxieties, including those highlighted by Rachel Bowser and Brian Croxall, that we are no longer able to understand our gadgets in the present day; the novels imagine solidly built technology that has limited functions. What became apparent in this analysis, however, is that some anxieties about contemporary technology are connected to the spectralising effects discussed in the previous chapter. A reading of Sherry Turkle's and Jaron Lanier's arguments revealed that the fear that technology is disconnecting us from physical, bodily (face-to-face) intimacy can be linked to a fear that it is disembodimenting us, *spectralising* us, in one version of non-corporeal haunting. Much steampunk literature participates in a conservative, reactionary discourse in relation to technology. Here, the spectrality that is part of the neo-historical, anachronistic approach to narrating fictional history becomes re-embodied. These steampunk novels place the human body as fundamental to human experience—and firmly, emphatically distance it from technology in order to assert this.

### **Neo-historical, neo-Victorian, and ghostly: Other work on contemporary historical fiction**

Considering, briefly, other discussions of historical fiction in the twenty-first century, I will here demonstrate—as I have throughout the chapters—that this 'neo-historical aesthetic' has not been identified in any other work. This thesis has argued that the past two decades have instantiated a specific literary response to postmodernism, which has grown out of its longstanding predecessors, whether historiographic metafiction or the longer tradition of women's history writing in fiction. Identifying and defining that response is an important intervention into currently developing interpretations of what post-postmodernism *is* and what relationships to history are in the twenty-first century. Although the term 'neo-historical' has also been used by Elodie Rousselot and the contributors to her edited collection, concurrently with my use of it, our articulations of what it means differ significantly, as I indicated in chapter one. Although we both observe the commitment to narrative in historical fiction after postmodernism, Rousselot sees a kind of return to realism—verisimilitude—taking place. The essays she brings together in *Exoticizing the Past in Contemporary Neo-Historical Fiction* (2014) focus, as the title suggests,

on the process of ‘othering’ that Rousselot reads as taking place in these verisimilitudinous neo-historical texts. Rousselot (2014: 2) sees ‘neo-historical fiction’ as being ‘not solely set in the past’, but also ‘conduct[ing] an active interrogation of that past’. In other words, she sees the past as a coherent unit, which neo-historical fiction can explore and interrogate. While I discussed the significance of such ‘othering’ of the past in my chapter on ghosts, my overall emphasis is on how the neo-historical aesthetic is imagining new pasts. (It is also significant that my ‘neo-historical aesthetic’ is different from her ‘neo-historical fiction’ in that it can be *partially* present, rather than being something a text generically *is* or *is not*.) This invention of pasts in the neo-historical aesthetic could be linked to a revisionist, anti-exclusionary politics, with a middlebrow sense of conservative ‘inclusion’ (see Ahmed 2012). However, in these texts, the ‘past’ is not a stable entity, as Rousselot implies, but is rather an ontologically uncertain combination of what Wendy Brown (2001: 140) calls ‘brute facticity’ and fiction; the influence of the present is such that they can never offer a stable version of ‘the past’. This, then, is where Rousselot’s and my arguments are fundamentally different.

The ‘neo’ of neo-Victorianism is also clearly relevant when considering the distinctions between the work in this thesis and others’ in the field, but in chapter three, I suggested that neo-Victorianism is a participant—with a specific interest in the nineteenth century—in the wider, cross-period neo-historical aesthetic. Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons’s arguments have recurred throughout this thesis; in their edited collection, they, and others, investigate the experiences of reading historical fiction over several centuries; explicitly focusing on what the process of *reading* can tell us about those fictions. However, while I share this investment in the significance of the (in my arguments, middlebrow) readership of these texts, I am interested in how postmodernism has changed the ways we ‘do’ history in fiction in the twenty-first century. Reader responses form a part of this, but in considering the specificity of the post-postmodern context, my work is also fundamentally different from Mitchell and Parsons’s in my focus on the neo-historical aesthetic’s *active* invention of new histories.

Given these close but distinctively different critical fields, which have developed over the past two decades, it is evident that defining the neo-historical aesthetic as post-postmodern and as a variably present *aesthetic*, rather than a more structurally enclosed *genre*, makes a substantial contribution to interpretations of historical fiction in the current critical environment. In recent years, historical fiction authors have used this in-between space of the middlebrow to test the boundaries of the uncertain ontologies of



postmodernism and post-postmodernism. The awareness of self-contradiction in these texts has been structurally and theoretically underpinned, in my analysis, by the real/not-real of Derridean spectrality. Where spectrality as a theoretical and critical tool for interpreting history stretches back to Derrida's excoriating response to Francis Fukuyama in *Specters of Marx* (1993), it has not been used as a critical tool specifically for understanding how a Derridean hauntology might open important ontological space for understanding history after postmodernism. Jerome de Groot's work has similarly considered the value of haunting in relation to historical fictions, but his focus on how the past haunts the present differs from my own interest in the achronological potential of the past, present, and future, all haunting each other, in these anachronistic texts.

This deployment of Derridean spectrality also positions this thesis as having a wider impact than just on the field of historical fiction criticism; it contributes to the wider, and still developing, definition of post-postmodernism itself. Indeed, hauntings are, in some ways, critically integral to understanding the post-postmodern condition as a whole—and this could be an important location for further research in the field. Post-postmodernism might be inherently haunted by, among other things, the spectres of the postmodernism that I have argued it both embraces and resists. As chapter one established, understanding the contemporary moment is, by its nature, a challenging process, to the extent that my decision to use 'post-postmodernism' as the term for defining the period is a potentially controversial one. There is not yet a critical consensus that such a strange, composite word is required at all, never mind agreement as to whether it is the most appropriate term to use. A certain commitment to chronology is implied in that 'post-post', which is problematic for my insistence on the resistance to chronology in the post-postmodern neo-historical aesthetic. However, that insistence on what comes after/post, in a literary stance that is equally preoccupied by what came before—both in terms of writing versions of the past and in returning to pre-postmodern narrative forms—produces a spiralling temporal self-contradiction. This makes 'post-postmodernism' seem highly appropriate for such a before-after-before relationship to narrating versions of the past. This is also true for the contradictions implied by the term 'neo-historical', used here to articulate that this aesthetic is knowingly both new and historical simultaneously, and that it celebrates these chronological self-contradictions.

In reading the middlebrow as at the heart of this manifestation of the contemporary cultural moment, I offer a new contribution to debates about post-postmodernism, resisting, for example, Jeffrey T. Nealon's investment in the academy as the site of post-

postmodern developments. (Although Nealon [2012: Chapter Four, Coda] does see wider cross-cultural manifestations of post-postmodernism, he becomes preoccupied by its relationship to ‘theory’ in academia.) Following the discussions of increasingly globalised neoliberal economics and commodity capitalism in chapter one, there are also questions about how this middlebrow might be problematically homogenising for post-postmodernism, especially (although not by any means exclusively) homogenising to a wider politics than just those of the global north and the west, which have, in general, comprised the necessarily restricted focus of this thesis.

Indeed, this thesis has, inevitably, been limited by capacity. Restricting my analysis to texts predominantly published in the UK, with a few from the US (several steampunk texts) and one from Australia (*Sixty Lights*), has clearly been the most substantial structural limitation. There are opportunities for further work considering the neo-historical in its postcolonial and otherwise non-white, non-privileged contexts. This is particularly the case with the haunted aspects of the aesthetic, with reference to Kathleen Brogan’s (1998) work on haunting and histories of ethnicity and racial violence.

The thesis has predominantly analysed novels written by women that participate in the neo-historical aesthetic (with the exceptions of Colson Whitehead, the directors of *The Others* and *The Awakening*, and Mark Hodder). This focus on women writers was both a very conscious choice and one that grew out of circumstances. I have sought to critique and counteract, along with other critics of the past few decades, the marginalisation of middlebrow women’s historical fiction from much academic consideration, because of its treatment as ‘unserious’ literature. This is also why I have positioned the middlebrow itself at the heart of my arguments. However, there would also be room for further consideration of the ways in which the neo-historical aesthetic might be gendered, with a consideration of a wider range of male writers of contemporary historical fiction and an interpretation how such texts might differ from women writers’ participation in the aesthetic.

### **Nostalgia**

In my discussions both of the neo-historical aesthetic and of the partly backward-looking structure of post-postmodernism itself, I have not directly addressed nostalgia. Fredric Jameson’s (1985: 117) definition of postmodernism, which was one of the founding texts for my definitions of post-postmodernism in chapter one, included a violent resistance to nostalgia, taking an especially dismissive attitude towards ‘nostalgia films’, and

characterising viewers' enjoyment in such films as a regressive 'desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again'. He writes that postmodern culture is inclined to be 'irredeemably historicist, in the bad sense of an omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions; indeed, for all the styles and fashions of a dead past' (Jameson 1991: 286). Although Nealon does not use the word 'nostalgia' in his analysis of the 1980s, the image he creates of inevitable post-postmodern aesthetic return—whether in fashion or media—to an earlier cultural moment does speak to a nostalgic attraction to the past. Nostalgia thus becomes a postmodern and post-postmodern inevitability, suffused with the tired, irrepressible revivifications of bygone moments. Rosi Braidotti (2005: 1), as I quoted in chapter one, sees post-postmodernism as defined by dramatic 'swings between nostalgia and euphoria', a strangely articulated dichotomy, which seems to place these two not-entirely-antithetical experiences in unexpected opposition to one another. Nostalgia, then, is an important consideration for a post-postmodern context.

Much historical fiction criticism has also been drawn into conversations about nostalgia. Some critics deride those texts seen to be naively and conservatively indulging in nostalgic overinvestment in the past—such as Linda Hutcheon (1988: 81, 93) and Christian Gutleben (2001: 193). Others read nostalgia as a means to disguise the wider problems of a contemporary relationship to history, which is Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's (2010: 225-226) perspective, for example. Rousselot (2014: 7) argues that globalisation contributes to our 'nostalgic obsession with appropriating and re-imagining the past', suggesting that with wider international tourism and the development of new technologies, the past has become one of the few unexplored and inexplicable 'others' that we can endlessly explore in 'neo-historical fiction'. The fact that arguments about nostalgia have been thoroughly and convincingly covered by other critics is one reason it has not been the central focus of this thesis. However, further research could focus on the ways in which two cultural phenomena—the enthusiasm for 'vintage' commodities and the neo-historical aesthetic—are linked by a potentially nostalgic attraction to the past, perhaps in pursuit of an escape from contemporary anxieties.

### **Commodification, consumer culture, and the middlebrow**

That #liveauthentic demonstrated a passionate enthusiasm for these repackaged 'vintage' items—often (although not exclusively) new products made to look old, rather than those that are antique—suggests the form of consumer culture in the twenty-first century in

which the ‘past’ is made attractively consumable. A discussion of nostalgia might also be linked to research on commodification and the neo-historical aesthetic’s mediations of postmodernism. Indeed, Jameson (1991: x) writes: ‘So, in postmodern culture, “culture” has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself’. Theories about commodification have appeared in various different ways in this thesis, from the commodification of authenticity in *#liveauthentic* in chapter one, to the ‘packaging’ of the middlebrow in chapter two, particularly via the *Stylist* launch, to the reproduction and consumption of real steampunk-style technologies at conventions in chapter four. Kate Mitchell (2010: 3) emphasises the commodification that she reads as a structural part of the neo-Victorian novel (‘how to package the Victorian past for the tastes and demands of contemporary readers’), and Elodie Rousselot (2014: 8) comments on this:

This ‘spectacularisation’ of the past is also indicative of the commodification of history as a prevalent trend in contemporary culture, manifest for instance in the rise of a thriving heritage industry, and in the proliferation of marketable period souvenirs and historical memorabilia.

Evidently, the logic of consumer culture is heavily involved in the narrativisation and reimagining of the past for the twenty-first century.

In chapter two, in relation to the middlebrow, I emphasised the productivity of that word ‘heritage’ for interpreting the neo-historical aesthetic. Considering Rousselot’s articulation of ‘the heritage industry’, as well as my own discussions of middlebrow organisations such as English Heritage, there is more work to be done here on the ways in which ‘heritage’ as a concept has become (or perhaps, equally interestingly, always has been) commodified and consumable. The middlebrowness of the neo-historical aesthetic reasserts a commitment to narrative after postmodernism, which is, not least, about ensuring narratives are consumable for readers, evading the exclusionary ‘difficulty’ of certain literary fictions. These fictions are saleable, as their repeated appearances on bestseller lists indicate. Again, then, the challenges inherent to my reading of the middlebrow emerge, in that it is democratically accessible, but also, here, a potentially transactionary unit in a commodity exchange. Jameson (1985: 124) argues that ‘The most offensive forms’ of postmodern art ‘are all taken in stride by society, and they are commercially successful, unlike the productions of the older high modernism’.

Obviously, all literature is, to some extent, participating in contemporary commercialisation—books have to be bought—and Beth Driscoll (2014: 23) writes on

the ways in which this commodity culture has long been treated with suspicion by literary culture: ‘Any expansion of the market for books has always been treated with suspicion, and that is precisely what the middlebrow does’. Driscoll also writes on the ways in which the covers of middlebrow novels are part of their middlebrowness, and there is much room for a consideration of this in relation to the recent *repackaging* of Sarah Waters’s novels in the style of 1920s middlebrow texts. This might prompt a consideration of the gendered and gendering implications of these different kinds of packaging. Without wishing to participate in a (Jamesonian?) elitist dismissal of the commercial necessities and attractions of the middlebrow, there is room for further investigation into the *influence* of that commodity culture on these narratives and the heritages they produce.

As I suggested at the end of the chapter on the middlebrow, Sarah Waters’s *The Paying Guests* goes a long way towards emphasising the ways in which commodity culture is part of the middle-class middlebrow. The shared purchasing and consumption of products dictates and organises the development of Frances and Lilian’s relationship; as mentioned, Lilian says to Frances ‘Have you never wanted nice things?’ (Waters 2014: 112) The ‘intimate public’ of their shared experience *is* commodified, in this context. As such, we are reading an imagined version of the past in which commodities structure the ways in which that past is presented. The commodity culture of the twenty-first-century middlebrow is thereby connected to its early-twentieth-century predecessor’s investment, also, in ‘things’.

An understanding of contemporary commodity culture thus emerges in these arguments as a further way in which the middlebrow and post-postmodernism are linked. I argued in chapter two that the middlebrow was, in some ways, the *only* possible location for the post-postmodern neo-historical aesthetic. This emphatic commodification, the packaging of histories for post-postmodern consumer culture, is another way in which this might be the case. Evidently, then, the potential for expanding these discussions of neo-historical commodification and the middlebrow is wide, and is worthy of further investigation. The middlebrow is fundamentally linked to all of the chapters in this thesis, from the middlebrow consumerism of #liveauthentic in chapter one, to the feminised hauntings of chapter three, to the difference between middlebrow neo-historical aesthetics and the lowbrow of steampunk in chapter four. That the middlebrow permeates these discussions of the neo-historical aesthetic is telling. As such, and with an awareness that the middlebrow continues to be understudied and marginalised from ‘literary’ discourse, it is perhaps inevitable that this emerges in these discussions as a key field for

future research. The neo-historical aesthetic is a newly developing, twenty-first-century literary feature, which means there are many directions, including many not covered here, that future research on it could take. This thesis has newly defined the haunted, ontological uncertainties that animate this contemporary cultural development, considering how a response to postmodern deconstructions of history and narrative in literature might be a key feature of post-postmodernism.

### **Conclusion: Getting it wrong**

In *The Underground Railroad*, Cora has a heated debate about the content of the bible with Ethel, one of her (troubled and problematic) captor/carers during her stay in the attic. Ethel insists that the bible denigrates dark skin, offering numerous citations of biblical passages, to which Cora responds with other, contradictory ones. She ultimately lets the argument go because: ‘For her part, Cora blamed the people who wrote it down. People always got things wrong, on purpose as much as by accident’ (Whitehead 2016: 182). That ‘on purpose as much as by accident’ is a significant phrase. Whitehead emphasises the deliberate exclusions of black experience from historical narrative, which has persistently reinforced white hegemonic discursive and literal dominance. But he also here draws attention to the deliberate inclusion of anachronisms in *The Underground Railroad* itself. In ‘writing down’ Cora’s story as a resistant narrative to the biblical hegemony of Ethel’s world, Whitehead too has ‘got it wrong’ on purpose, emphasising the impossibility of formulating a ‘real’ version of history, and especially one that can encompass the scale and trauma of generations of racial violence.

This is, therefore, a pertinent quotation for understanding the neo-historical aesthetic. Its self-referentiality, in a text full of deliberate anachronisms, exposes Whitehead’s knowing awareness of his own process of ‘getting things wrong on purpose’. Postmodernism, building on discourses that came before it, emphasised that for as long as history has been written—whether in fictional or in ‘factual’ narratives, or those that sit somewhere between the two—people have always been getting things wrong, ‘on purpose as much as by accident’, enforcing and reinforcing hegemonies. In a post-postmodernist turn, the neo-historical aesthetic plays in precisely these ‘getting it wrong’ gaps, acknowledging the limitations of writing in narrative even as it commits to narrative itself. The neo-historical aesthetic is a self-contradictory, middlebrow development in contemporary literature, in which the haunted, ontological uncertainties of post-postmodernism propose new methods for ‘doing’ history in fiction. Authors are

continuing to 'get things wrong'. However, now they are (sometimes) doing so *knowingly*, 'on purpose', and fundamentally self-referentially, sharing that knowingness with readers through anachronisms, through haunted proleptic ironies, through trace meanings in text, and through a range of other methods. The inevitable presence of the present in trying to write about the past is thus made apparent. This thesis has defined this work of the neo-historical aesthetic for the first time, thereby contributing to newly developing interpretations of post-postmodernism itself.

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