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Allan H. Pasco

New Literary History, Volume 35, Number 3, Summer 2004, pp. 373-394  
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2004.0044



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# Literature as Historical Archive

Allan H. Pasco

## I. Introduction

Can literature legitimately serve as a historical archive?<sup>1</sup> Although it is not quite true that “Everybody does it!” as I have heard said repeatedly, it is remarkable how common it has become for historians to adduce novels, poems, and plays as illustrations and sources. In conversations and more formal interchanges at conferences, historians of culture and literature readily recognize that “it is done all the time,” referring to work by Lucien Febvre, Robert Darnton, Terry Castle, Felicity Nussbaum, Deidre Lynch, Terry Eagleton, Lynn Hunt, Susan Dunn, Mary Louise Roberts, Bruce Robbins, and others.<sup>2</sup> To say that art is regularly exploited as cultural artifact is, of course, not to say that it should be. Some take the position that such use of literature should be avoided, since art is not fact, and one should not confuse history with fantasy. Some even believe, with Plato, that art is a lie.<sup>3</sup> Still, while literary works would not normally provide exact information about speeches, laws, wars, or coal production, they do serve particularly well for insight into common opinions and attitudes, everyday life in the streets, in houses, apartments, and hovels.

The reliability of literature in revealing general background and individual attitudes has particular importance for scholars interested in late eighteenth-century France, and I consequently turn to it as an exemplary case. Few of the letters, diaries, civil records, or notarial inventories have been preserved intact, if at all, a lack of archival materials that leads to unanswered questions. How can one gain insight into states of mind, conscious and unconscious assumptions, attitudes, opinions, prejudices, and emotions of the people that lived then?<sup>4</sup> Robert Darnton, Robert Mandrou, Antoine de Baecque, and others have turned to unusual archives like publishers’ and booksellers’ records, popular chapbooks, and pornography for discoveries about the period, but there remains much we do not know, particularly regarding the attitudes (*mentalités*) of eighteenth-century people. In fact, we are very poorly acquainted with the lower and middle classes that made up the vast majority of the population. As a consequence, it is important

both to develop new resources for uncovering the past and to find new perspectives on older resources.

The following pages will look at other archives in preparation for a more extensive consideration of literature as a cultural repository. Following the lead of a few cultural historians, I will suggest that, when handled judiciously, and in answer to appropriate questions, literature can provide a reliable window on the past. Used carefully—and remembering that reality is never pure, simple, or linear—literature and the arts can bring fresh light to our perception of history. One should not expect literature to be an exact mirror or have a one-to-one relationship with objective reality—the mimetic fallacy—but the historian/critic can find it extraordinarily useful. It is a response to reality, whether by reflection or reaction.

## II. Available Archives

Some historians whet our appetites for exploiting literature as a historical document. Georges Lefebvre says, for example, “[T]he mass of the population [during the Revolution] felt no danger.” Furthermore, he explains, the French were little concerned with the often outrageously impractical decisions of the National Assembly. “Frenchmen . . . could ignore those decrees of the Assembly that did not please them. Even public disorders, so long as they appeared to be only transitory, did not trouble them greatly.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Lefebvre does not document his observation. Lacking support, some historians would bolster his conclusion by considering the recent actions of people during times of danger. When conditions are unsettled and people worry about their own or their family’s lives, emigration tends to increase, while those who remain withdraw and barricade themselves within their homes. If the danger is not imminent, reasonable citizens go quietly about their affairs and stay away from areas where there is trouble. Still, making assumptions about the past on the basis of what is going on in the present may well result in significant error. People of bygone days do indeed resemble those of the present, but the differing forces acting on them could have brought individuals to respond in very different ways.<sup>6</sup> As a case in point, although most recent suicides have severe depression at their root, we cannot be certain that similar causes explain the important increase in suicides in the revolutionary period and the early nineteenth century, when endemic malnutrition and disease impacted the classes where suicide was more likely to be reported.

Newly discovered subscription lists and notarial records occasionally amplify such standard archives as legislative records, court documents,

police reports, pamphlets, posters, and handbills that provide the history of the day with a disciplining armature. Particularly during the Revolution, printers inundated Paris with broadsides, tracts, pamphlets, and books that give us information about important occurrences and make it quite easy to harvest information about the limited number of politically active citizens. We also have records of legislation and the published correspondence, memoirs, and speeches of notables, but we have very little means of gaining insight into the beliefs, mind-sets, values, social constraints, and passions of what might be called the "silent majority." Occasional resources, like Jacques-Louis Ménétra's diary, *Journal of My Life*, open a peephole on the artisan class. The Gounon family papers also have importance in that they provide a rather complete description of a family of provincial notables who, though very successful in the 1770s and '80s, found themselves in significant danger starting in 1792. Nonetheless, what records we still have provide little information on the level of everyday life.

Cultural historians are frustrated by the limited number of personal documents that remain from the late eighteenth century. The explanations for this dearth are several. Not only is there the very natural tendency to discard what has little value, the need for secrecy, as illustrated by the Gounon family, added impetus to the systematic destruction of private papers. During the Terror citizens could be sent to the guillotine when they were known to have received a letter, however innocuous, from suspect people who had emigrated or who had been condemned to death for political reasons. The historian has to deal with a scarcity of parish registers and individually written artifacts, and in addition must question the reliability of other quasi-official documents. Michel Vovelle has argued that sermons, prayers, and funeral orations provide accurate insights into society,<sup>7</sup> but such material is suspect in this period of emptying churches, conflicting Constitutional, or jurant, and non-jurant priests, and a secular government that was attempting to confiscate the Church's land, impose a new organization, elect priests, and take for itself many of the church's functions. Official records like police reports were often destroyed by mobs. Fire and moisture did even more damage. Most often we simply have no explanation for why the documents are missing, and we are forced to draw reasonable conclusions from what remains. The legal records considered by Marie-Claude Phan become increasingly irregular as the Revolution approached.<sup>8</sup> I might also mention that the registers recording the sentences of ecclesiastical courts in Cambrai are missing from 1774.<sup>9</sup> We do not know why. They are simply not with the other registers in the Archives Départementales du Nord. Such unexplained lacunae are common in the period's archives.

Sometimes the unsatisfactory state of records can be explained by administrative decision or simple inaction. Statistics on death, for example, were compiled only after 1825; those on migration have so many variables that we are left with assumptions if not guesswork. In 1792, the National Assembly decided to remove many record-keeping duties from the parishes, with the idea that such responsibilities were the task of the secular government, which was, unfortunately, so ill-prepared and insufficiently financed that it was simply unable to accomplish the new duties. Jacques Dupâquier says without equivocation, “[T]he governments that succeeded each other from 1789 until 1799 were incapable of producing reliable statistics.”<sup>10</sup> Starting with the resignations of the Feuillant ministers on July 10, 1792, there was even a period when France had no government at all.<sup>11</sup> Non-jurant clergy seldom cooperated. Some priests continued to chronicle the events of their parish, not simply refusing to swear allegiance to the new order but as well turning a deaf ear to official demands to cede recording duties to the appropriate government official and warning their flocks against observance of the new law.<sup>12</sup> Others kept records that suffered the ravages of mobs, and still others tried to do as they were instructed, even to the point of keeping no records at all. And, to bring this tale of statistical woe to a conclusion, many public records were destroyed in the disorders of 1871.

Of course, anyone who has done archival research knows that documents are often missing and in disorder. If the gaps are not too great, we are justified in generalizing from existing incomplete and fragmented data. After all, today we understand that all historical sources must be interpreted and, then, fit into some sort of an appropriate overview or narrative. We do not simply list all cases of, say, the reasons for suicide during the Revolution; we study the reported cases, whatever notes remain, and the police reports, to give several examples and a considered conclusion or opinion. Such generalizations, opinions, or conclusions are, however, impossible without a minimum amount of information, and the problems caused by incomplete and missing records become especially acute in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French archives. We have to wonder, for example, how many “accidental” deaths resulting from carbon monoxide poisoning were in reality suicides. In particular, we are left virtually in the dark about the middle and lower classes of the period, about individual responses to the riots, famines, and festivals, and about day-to-day life during the Revolution. Because of the paucity and unreliability of documents remaining to us, most information about those who were not “notables” (from *le menu peuple, les petites gens*, through the artisans, to much of the growing middle class), which constituted perhaps ninety-five percent of the population, is nonexistent. Different archives need to

be exploited to reveal how the people felt, how they were affected by the Revolution, whether—and, if so, how—they were influenced by those world-shaking events that were taking place in and around Paris.

### III. Historicizing Literature

Though literature has not been ignored in the endeavor to comprehend the past, Sarah Maza has said, “[T]he use of properly ‘literary’ texts by historians is an interesting subject, which still remains for the most part unexamined.”<sup>13</sup> There are nonetheless a number of scholars who light the way. Lucien Febvre and his colleagues claimed that adequate consideration of a period was impossible without a sense of the way people felt about the small and large events of the day. To this end, Febvre proposed a history that includes study of the arts, which are “of inestimable value, on the condition naturally . . . that we observe the same critical precautions in the manipulation of literary texts as in the study and use of . . . figurative art.”<sup>14</sup> His *Le problème de l’incroyance au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: La religion de Rabelais* attempts to cast a bright light on an entire age by working with the writings of Rabelais. It makes fascinating reading, though he doubtless goes too far when he takes Rabelais as a reliable lens for the rest of the period. While Febvre’s learning, intuition, and plain good sense make his work very persuasive, it is impossible not to suspect that his source limits him to an elite that had little to do with the more general culture. With the exception of his *Religion de Rabelais*, Febvre’s use of such materials was quite restrained. My objection is not that Febvre looked to literature, but that he depended too much on one work, which continues to be the practice of many scholars of cultural studies or cultural history.<sup>15</sup> Very few indeed refer to even as many as half-a-dozen, and, without overwhelming corroborating material from other archives, their conclusions are very suspect. Given thousands of alternatives, it is far too easy to find one or two or ten plays and novels that could support almost any position. How many literary works are necessary to gain reliable insights into the attitudes of a particular period? Given what we have learned about the nontransparency of texts over the last thirty years, is there a means of finding a trustworthy indication of social realities in literature?

In one area, at least, subsequent scholars have moved far toward doing away with the limitations that arise from the way Febvre uses art. Robert Mandrou and Geneviève Bollème are more convincing than other historians when they look at numerous—though surely not all—exemplars of peddler literature (*de colportage*), those inexpensive, roughly printed chapbooks of horoscopes, saints’ lives, almanacs, home rem-

edies, prognostication, legends, and fairy tales making up the *Bibliothèque bleue* that itinerant salesmen sold throughout France. They provide a better grasp of the potential of art as history by arguing that the peddler literature successfully expands our understanding of the attitudes and beliefs of the lower (“popular”) classes. There is no question that such works sold phenomenally well, indeed, by the hundreds of thousands. They produced substantial wealth for the printers that produced them.<sup>16</sup> By drawing conclusions based on the study of numerous examples of the *Bibliothèque bleue*, Mandrou and Bollème are quite convincing. Because they examined a wide array of works, their findings are much more compelling than if they had investigated only a few.

Using literature as a means of reading the hearts and minds of individuals of long ago has, of course, its requirements. There is no doubt, as Chevalier warned, that “you have . . . to know how to listen.”<sup>17</sup> The necessity of care in turning to such documents does not negate their usefulness, however, for, to paraphrase Robert Darnton discussing fairy tales, they provide points of entry into the mental world of the Old Regime.<sup>18</sup> Without exception, every text coming to us from the past must be considered with discretion, knowingly interrogated by a well-trained critic who keeps its function, tradition, and genre firmly in mind. In most contexts, for example, it would be a mistake to interpret the Marlboro Man as a symbol of lung cancer, or Proust’s “little section of yellow wall” in terms of cowardice. As Bruce Robbins points out, for another example, representations of servants from at least as far back as Terence and Plautus through eighteenth-century English (and French) literature fall for the most part into two categories: the clever trickster and the buffoon. One would not want to make too much of their “realistic portrayal.”<sup>19</sup> Without literary background it is easy to misinterpret ironic passages or to ascribe irony where none was intended, to ignore the importance of repeated elements, to misconstrue traditionally weighted objects or images, and so on. Once one has adequately read the text as a single, individual creation, it needs to be viewed in its social context.<sup>20</sup> Not infrequently, it is because of some element or relationship active in a work of art that we notice important though previously ignored aspects of our civilization. As Richard Johnson puts it, “Forms, regularities and conventions first identified in literature (or certain kinds of music or visual art) often turn out to have a much wider social currency.”<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. The Finances of Publication

Though hundreds of tireless pens recorded eighteenth-century thoughts, feelings, fears, hopes, and attitudes in novels, plays, and

poems, the resulting literary production has attracted few readers in the last 150 years. The novels and plays would have little interest today, were it not that in their time they did attract readers and spectators in significant numbers and thus indicate that writers were not alone in their obsessions. Just as the chapbooks reflected the demands of their public,<sup>22</sup> so too did the novels and plays of the late eighteenth century. An important, ever-expanding segment of society supported the literary creations by purchasing books and theatre tickets. As Roger Chartier puts it, "By means of more or less massive purchasing, readers indicated their preferences; thus their tastes were in a position to influence book production itself."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, flesh-and-blood readers and spectators assured life for fiction when their hard-earned money was devoted to watching characters act out their lives on stage or page.

In preceding periods, authors could get by if they satisfied a wealthy patron or a small cadre of like-minded people, and they tended to write for an elite. But from the mid-eighteenth century it was no longer common for a scribbler to discover a patron who would pay for the honor of patronizing publication. Publishing had changed. Now, successful writers depended on mass markets of people who would purchase or rent their published wares. Novelists and playwrights in particular were required to attract consumers, whether readers or spectators. To be more precise, writers had to create works that would appeal to others, many others, and attract an audience with money in hand. In 1838 Balzac summed up the practice already more than half-a-century old: "The destiny of French literature is today fatally linked to the bookstore and the newspaper."<sup>24</sup> Publishers and theatrical producers welcomed only those writers who could be counted on to build a following among the rather large and rapidly growing general public. Publishing novels, like producing plays, was expensive, and bankruptcy awaited those who could not successfully predict public taste. If a writer created a particular fiction or play, if publishers or producers were willing to gamble their financial investment of time, equipment, and personnel in order to bring such creations to the public, if people actually paid to experience the end products, if such works were republished, one can reasonably expect the creations to speak to the same society and, often, to reflect the same reality. By studying a single, large sample of novels and plays, scholars should be able to replicate each other's work, much like good scientific experiments permit replication. When approached with historical discernment and critical acumen, literature becomes an increasingly reliable archive as its public changed from a limited elite to a mass audience, for it responded to the demands of its readers. Those upper-class people who had previously served as patrons and subventioned books and plays were no longer



capable of controlling literature. Paying customers from all the classes took over the financing, and the mere fact that people continued to purchase and thus support novels, poems, and plays makes it clear that individual readers sensed some aspect, some sort of resonance, some application, something that attracted them. Novelists and playwrights were giving form to public attitudes, insecurities, and yearnings.

Jacques Le Goff rightly insists that in most periods "literary and artistic works obey laws that are more or less independent of their temporal environment."<sup>25</sup> But, as suggested above, at the end of the eighteenth century literature becomes particularly accurate as an indication of reality, for art was turning from patronage to a growing and increasingly broad-based audience that writers and artists were forced to please. Consequently, literature was becoming "mass media," and as Le Goff has also said, "Mass media are privileged vehicles and matrixes for [insight] into society's mindset."<sup>26</sup> Phrased more simply, literature was turning into *popular* literature, that is, novels, poems, and plays that depended on their ability to attract a mass audience. If a creative work sold, it did so because it responded to the desires and needs of the people that bought it, often by the cartload.

Titles and texts leave no doubt that readers sought amusement and escape. People also read for information. Mandrou's consideration of how-to books and almanacs makes that clear. On turning to the novels of the period and on noting the virtually universal reflections of and commentaries on contemporary society, it seems reasonable to conclude that people demanded that literature be both verisimilar and connected to their own world. One of the topics that most interested this public was its own culture. Daniel Roche draws attention to the works of Mercier and Restif particularly, since, though their writings have a strong dose of fiction, each is a "reconstructed whole that establishes notable distance between lived reality, real experience, and the story. . . . Fiction, fantasy, social critique, self-taught erudition intertwine to make . . . of incoherent reality a homogenous system. . . . [T]heir moral presuppositions, the mixture of fiction and reality, the effort to transpose so that they take into consideration the way unimportant people lived . . . [make them] irreplaceable witnesses of the people of Paris."<sup>27</sup> But it was not just the works of Mercier and Restif; all of the period's literature represents a recognizable reality. The heroes and the events might well be invented, but within the work's context, the attitudes, the background, the hopes and fears, and considerable detail often give every indication of being the stuff of customary life.

Because realism was such an important part of eighteenth-century literature, we can assume that people looked to novels to elucidate aspects of their world, to reveal it as it was in actuality, to explain things

so that they would be more able to understand and cope with the turmoil they saw and sensed around them.<sup>28</sup> Everyone was well aware that France was changing, and they wanted to know more: how it was happening, what it was becoming, and how it would affect them. Classical art featuring flower-bedecked, perfumed peasants enjoying elegant ballets of languorous love in Elysian fields was no longer attractive. Most often, if writers situated their adventures in the past, it was a European or, better, a French history that dealt with problems of current interest. Increasingly, literature treated the events of the present. While manuals of literary history discuss at length the introduction of Enlightenment ideas and the “green” of real nature to literature, immersion in the actual works of pre-romantic and revolutionary literature incontrovertibly demonstrates that writers were struggling to portray the reality that surrounded them. The plot and, increasingly across the eighteenth century, the characters and their personalities were realistic.<sup>29</sup> Where it can be verified, there is no doubt that the background generally reflects the actual customs, attitudes, and facts of the contemporary world, a perhaps surprising correspondence between literature and society that leaves no doubt that readers wanted to understand the world around them. In short, the study of literature constitutes a very useful addition to our attempts to gain a comprehensive view of the late eighteenth century.

## V. Readers, Texts, and Society

Just how much of the populace was affected by the explosion of publications? In fact, we do not know the literacy rate at the end of the eighteenth century. The reading public was growing rapidly, but it is difficult to be exact about numbers. Several scholars have assumed that an individual’s ability to sign his or her name indicates reading skills. Geneviève Bollème says that between 1786 and 1790, forty-seven percent of Frenchmen and twenty-seven percent of Frenchwomen could sign their names, whereas a century before it was only twenty-nine percent and fourteen percent, respectively.<sup>30</sup> Roger Chartier claims that the rate was even higher among artisans and shopkeepers.<sup>31</sup> Of course, as Bollème points out, nothing proves a necessary relationship between signing and reading. I rather suspect that there were many more readers than such data would indicate. I have known of several people who could read, though they signed with an “X.” Professor Emile Talbot tells me his grandfather was in this category. Professor Francis Noel Thomas offers a contrary example: although his grandmother could sign her name, she could not read. Perhaps a more adequate indication of the

numbers of people who could read are the numbers of books being printed. The inventory of Etienne Garnier's stock at his death in 1789, for example, included 443,069 chapbooks. It is unlikely that he would print such quantities unless he believed he would be able to sell them. Garnier's and other publishers' print runs of the *Bibliothèque bleue* were often substantial. Bollème cites one of 18,500 copies, though most were between 2,000 and 5,000. Emmet Kennedy documents printings of "anywhere from 500 to 60,000 copies."<sup>32</sup> This in a country whose population at the time is estimated to be no more than twenty-eight million people. In respect to the more lengthy and numerous novel publications, Angus Martin, Vivienne G. Mylne, and Richard Frautschi's *Bibliographie du genre romanesque français, 1751–1800* documents the irregular but significant increase in novels published—in original, in translation, and in republication—through the last half of the century. Large numbers of people were reading, or, expressed another way, a large percentage of the population could and did read. The widespread practice of oral reading as a social activity would, indeed, have spread the influence of print even further, although it seems unlikely that groups where works were read aloud could have been sufficiently numerous to explain the plethora of publications.

Novels, especially, were a popular form that was designed to engage a mass audience. They were often quite long, which gave authors the space for extended insights, ideas, and opinions. Accordingly, if we want a deeper understanding of attitudes, long fictions are more useful than other genres, for they provide marvelously fertile portrayals of mind-sets and cultural reality. As Mme de Staël says in the preface to *Delphine* (1802), "History only makes us aware of the big strokes that are manifested by the power of circumstances, but it cannot make us penetrate into the intimate impressions which, by exerting influence on the will of certain individuals, has determined the fate of everyone."<sup>33</sup> The cumulative insights of theatrical and novelistic "fiction" into attitudes, habits of thought, customs, and the details of ordinary life are often not just verisimilar but true, or, at least, believed true by the people of the time. Though Hayden White argues that history is a story that reveals the storyteller, I want to invert that insight and suggest that stories frequently reveal history, especially its motivations and cultural reality. Perhaps only through the arts can one open a perspective onto historical patterns of attitudes, behavior, fashions, and optics of viewing and appreciation.

Having now read hundreds of late eighteenth-century novels and plays, not to mention numerous memoirs and letters by notables, I can safely say that, in general, only the characters and their foregrounded actions are "made up," and even those actions are rigorously maintained

either within the bounds of what is verisimilar or within the logical system which maintains verisimilitude while permitting unrealistic events and actions.<sup>34</sup> To attract and hold readers, the attitudes and many of the facts must of necessity be possible if not true. Even when authors are particularly inventive, they cannot fail to retain enough of contemporary reality for readers to establish a relationship with the invention. Fantasy did exist, and the successful utopian and exotic tales leave no doubt of its attraction, but even stories of the supernatural were most often set solidly in reality. Mme Robert takes her readers on the *Voyages de Milord Céton dans les sept planètes* (1765–66) and Guillaume Grivel, to *L'isle inconnu* (1783–87), but the real subject of both is unquestionably France. Diderot later encapsulated the whole matter: “He who would take what I write as the truth would be less mistaken than he who would take it as a fable.”<sup>35</sup> Often the social attitudes integrated into works of art need to be ferreted out, especially the hidden realities like incest. As I argued in *Sick Heroes*, in regard to the novels and plays from 1750 to 1850, when over half of all works of literature set up incestuous relationships, it almost certainly reflects a social concern and corresponding reality, especially when we know from other archives that conditions were ripe for such relationships.<sup>36</sup> Frequency of literary occurrence is significant, for the same reference or relationship in numerous works of art gives more reason to believe that literature is reflecting the incestuous reality, whether the characters are merely raised together, as in *Paul et Virginie* (1788), or truly related by blood, as in Jouy’s *Cécile, ou les passions* (1827), Sand’s *François le Champi* (1848), and many others.

The accuracy of literature is to some degree indicated when it mentions many events, like the execution of Louis XVI or the bread riots, for which there is considerable extraliterary substantiation. One might assume that other literary realities could also be found in society, even when there is a paucity of external proof. Sometimes, of course, once we have an insight, it is possible to find solid, reassuring documentation in other archives. Certainly, art as a historical archive makes its most convincing contributions in uncovering unexpected patterns or in discovering points of contrast that have corroborating evidence elsewhere. Such new perspectives and ideas about the past may be invaluable, since they are among the few windows onto the relationships and mind-sets of a period’s people and their culture. In other cases, when little external support exists, the material may nonetheless be significant and useful. Though we cannot prove the importance of suicide beginning in the 1760s, for instance, literature leaves no doubt that it had a major impact on people, for it becomes an increasingly common, emphasized literary event in eighteenth-century literature. As time has

passed, scholars like Cobb, Ratcliff, and Merrick have discovered other documentary evidence to shore up such implications.

The necessity of multiplicity of example and focus of significance imposes a way of working. As one would expect, given that “text” derives from the Latin *textus*, meaning “weaving” or “web,” texts always create an intricate tapestry of relationships that are, in addition, an intimate part of the social web. Such embedded literary creations indicate attitudes, no matter how fantastic the main characters and their actions may be. Major writers of our own century from Proust to Foucault have shown that literature *and* society are extremely complicated, interrelated complexes (or icons or images) of experience that are frequently replicated. I think, for example, of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which was organized around the belief that his fictional “life” coheres from start to finish because of the elements that, in repeating, recall others in the narrator’s unique life. The taste of the madeleine resuscitates an extension that recalls a world to the narrator, and the gatherings at Combray with Aunt Léonie are rejuvenated at every level of society as the characters form other circles of intimates. The church steeples of Méséglise reverberate with the mention of every bell, and the orange juice served *chez les Guermantes* ties Oriane to Mme Verdurin. Almost any thread of leitmotifs may be followed into the entire tapestry of Proust’s masterpiece, which is inseparably joined to its society through innumerable relationships with social realities that we know to be true, like the description of a dying aristocracy or the conflicting attitudes toward war with Germany.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, *A la recherche du temps perdu* is exceptional. It is nonetheless typical in its resemblance to all other artworks that form an intimate part of their contemporary society. Perhaps not every aspect of literature or society forms an extension that eventually allows us to envisage a whole, and it is, to be sure, true that not all details, not all traits, not all relationships are interesting. Furthermore, nothing assures that the investigator will remark the element that proves truly significant. Leo Spitzer admitted in regard to his own “philological circle” that he could provide no step-by-step rationale to assure that someone else would choose an unquestionably significant element. “The first step is the awareness of having been struck by a detail, followed by a conviction that this detail is connected basically with the work.”<sup>38</sup> As several well-regarded scholars recently pointed out in respect to cultural studies, there are “no guarantees about what questions are important to ask within given contexts or how to answer them: hence no methodology can be privileged or even temporarily employed with total security and confidence, yet none can be eliminated out of hand. Textual analysis, semiotics, deconstruction, ethnography, interviews, phonemic analysis,

psychoanalysis, rhizomatics, content analysis, survey research can all provide important insights and knowledge."<sup>39</sup> Is the salient element or relationship regularly found with particular attitudes? Does it occur in other contexts? Guided by whatever appropriate methodology, the investigator must remain sensitive to linguistic change and cultural differences, thus avoiding interpretations of the past exclusively in terms of the present. Scholars who were "in one accord" a hundred years ago were not in a Honda Accord, for example. It is equally important to be able to take the insight gained from one passage and consider whether it works elsewhere in the text in hand. If the object or quality is indeed a consistent part of the work, it may be illuminating to compare the various contexts as they fit into the whole and to consider whether anything besides the detail is a consistent presence.

Sensitivity to the contexts where the repeated elements are incorporated, while viewing them as well in relation to other works, is essential. With a suspicion that the repetition may be important in other literary works and elsewhere, the inquiry shifts to the way the motif fits into the larger social context. Is this association, indeed, also found in other works? in different kinds of contexts? Given that all these texts occur in synchronic and diachronic relationship with other sociological phenomena and that they form a complex of interlocking elements reflecting the world of the day, significant extensions will exist to and from other works of literature and will key some aspect of the larger field of society. Salient elements will form extensions that connect similar contexts in other of the author's creations and in those of other writers. As readers make the conceptual journey from element, to textual context, to other contexts, to society, and back, new insights and discoveries may occur. At some point, the recurrent patterns should be gathered together and considered as a constellation that will almost certainly configure either a particular social reality or a reaction to that reality. The larger the sample, the better, though one must remain open to whatever variant meanings exist.

The fact that important details of novels and plays form relationships that lead inevitably to a complete text opens the possibility of testing interpretations: if a complex or web of relationships within a literary work is a valid response to the social reality, we should be able to find similar elements, objects, attitudes, or experiences in other creations and in other parts of the social fabric. The relationship may not be obvious to anyone but a professional historian or, in other instances, a literary critic. Take Carolyn Steedman's example of a plethora of sweetly pathetic orphans in nineteenth-century European literature that bring with them certain expectations. For Steedman, they were designed to make readers hope the children would eventually find the warmth and

love of a home. Consequently, they constitute a topos that destines them for death.<sup>40</sup> For readers of French popular literature, they more commonly initiate “rags to riches” narratives. Such topoi invite, indeed require, interpretation: a glance at relevant statistics makes it clear that numerous children without parents in literature do not reflect an increase in orphans; in fact, those numbers had not changed significantly for several hundred years. But the waifs may point to growing sympathy for children, though that too requires confirmation from several vantage points. It may also be that the presence of abused children in fiction grows from feelings of rejection and abandonment fostered by contemporary childcare practices.<sup>41</sup> Testing is essential, since our interpretations are not infallible. The fact that Mme de Staël’s Léonce in *Delphine*, for example, wanted a divorce does not mean that everyone did, or that divorce was particularly important outside the world of the novel or of the author. Assurance of the latter possibility is, however, increased when many revolutionary texts have divorce as a central event. Even then, if the examples do not elicit particular mind-sets, one can reach no reliable conclusions about how the period perceived divorce. While misreading remains a danger, constant comparison will maintain a focus on the contexts within the literary work and within society and will help weed out erroneous conclusions. Focus, or congruence of import, is essential. Should there be no consistent relationship between the detail or pattern and the context, the element is doubtless of no real interest for cultural inquiry.

Often it is the presence or absence of a mere detail recurring in many works that provides the key to a mental set, as when Philippe Ariès noticed the paucity of children in paintings done under the monarchy, or, more recently, my own awareness of the remarkable number of times divorce is mentioned in late eighteenth-century literature. Often it is an attitude toward life that recurs with such frequency that it gains perceptible substance. With broad reading, knowing comparison, and skillful interpretation, tested when possible against more conventional archives, such insights can become quite convincing. Personality types, similar kinds of events, repeated themes, motifs, images, and symbols that recur are especially intriguing. To cite an example, sociologists and historians specializing in migration concentrate on such “push factors” as the desire to spread Christianity, scientific curiosity, the need for new and secure markets, new sources of raw materials, and the opportunity for investment, as well as larger political and diplomatic strategies. The period’s utopian and exotic novels, however, reveal instead a marked, frequently repeated source of anguish in the profound transformation occurring at every level of personal and public French life that drove people to consider options elsewhere in the world. Unambiguously

expressed, there are as well the importance of social turmoil, financial problems, heavy if not unfair taxation, military conscription, and the Revolution itself that reveal the instability, rapid change, and fear for their own and their families' futures as the French approached the end of the century and suffered revolutionary changes in many aspects of their lives. These factors do not directly reflect the canonized "push factors," for which I have found *no* supportive letters, though I have discovered letters that described the personal anxieties that brought emigrants to abandon France.<sup>42</sup> Natalie Z. Davis believes that the "push toward planning" marks the change between early modern and modern France.<sup>43</sup> I would counter that for literary personages and, by extension, for French people an *inability* to plan and prepare with any confidence for the potentially tumultuous future constitutes a significant reflection of the social mood of late eighteenth-century France.

## VI. Conclusion

The revolutionary age in France is particularly fruitful for using literature as a means of examining and revealing, not a writer, but a period, and in suggesting the realities and causes for some of the more important characteristics of the age. Particularly toward the end of the eighteenth century, when reading was gaining in importance as part of the social fabric,<sup>44</sup> novels, poems, and plays provide an invaluable tool for plumbing the hopes and fears, the dreams, the realities of a people. Whether such obsessive observers as Mercier and Restif or those who were less explicitly attempting to reflect the social reality, writers were inescapably a part of their society, as were the publishers and producers who invested in their convictions that others would seek and procure the right to read or watch particular artistic creations. The more frequent, the more numerous the repeated elements or opinions or structures, the more likely that writers were dealing with one or more truths of the period. When the same ideas, images, objects, descriptions, or fantasies reappear in numerous works by different authors, one is justified in concluding that they were important to French people of the time. When both frequency of occurrence and congruence of content or meaning occur—whether in respect to subject matter, detail, patterns, attitude, or types of events or character—there is more reason to accept the results as an accurate, meaningful reflection of the culture.

A study of art uncovers a society's conscious and unconscious reality in all its glory and shame. It is important to look not only for aesthetic pleasure but for insights into the period's people. Elements that are repeated, sometimes obsessively, in the same and different works by the



same and different artists have particular significance. These constants can then be measured against other facts we know about the time. Reading between the lines and in a broad context, including other data and interpretations, and reading in a critically sophisticated way, aware of tropes, conventions, codes, recurrent patterns, metaphorical strategies, and generic considerations, may bring new understanding to "fiction" and to society. Though some of these artistic creations are less successful from an aesthetic point of view, all are useful to reveal the social realities of the period. It is indisputable that the fictions of a social group, whether major or minor works, to some degree reveal and define a people for what and who they are. When making broad applications, the numerous contexts must, of course, be rigorously compared to be certain of an acceptable interpretation.

As should be clear, the recurrences in a wide array of works and the frequency of repetition are keys to the importance of the repeated element. Iteration increases the likelihood that numerous writers and, by extension, readers had actually held the views, dreamed the dreams, and perceived the realities that they describe, as does the corroborating fact that some profit-oriented publisher or producer thought the particular work would appeal to many others who would pay for the privilege of reading or seeing it. During this period particularly, widespread buying of literary works attests to their popular appeal. Such indications are little adulterated by either critical hyperbole or well-publicized prizes for works selected by an "elite," which reduces the reliability of book-buying as a pure reflection of popular affirmation. Republication is even more significant, since it proves the work had previously succeeded in establishing resonance with a public (precisely the reason the popular *Bibliothèque bleue* has such importance). People filled theatres and soaked up mounds of novels. When the same objects, images, descriptions, attitudes, or structures reappear in numerous works by different authors, it is only a small step to deduce that it was a part of the mind-set of contemporary French people. One or two works are not enough to make reasonable, if tentative, conclusions, for conclusions based on such a limited sample, as is all too common in recent cultural studies, may well give a skewed, inaccurate picture. There is indeed safety in numbers.

Raw facts of history can be revitalized with a human touch when historians have a better understanding of the fantasies, beliefs, fears, and loves of the people. Such attitudes are crucial to the ways people see their world and go far in explaining their actions. Novels, plays, poems, and essays, many of which include extensive social commentary, can bring considerable depth to history and the study of culture. French writers as important as Beaumarchais and as minor as Mme de Genlis

frequently described the society around them at considerable length. As Lucien Febvre, Robert Mandrou, indeed the entire *Annales* school, and others have demonstrated, literature is especially important for making history come alive with breadth and detail. Michelle Perrot puts it succinctly: “[N]ovels . . . may be consulted as legitimate historical sources because they reveal more fully than other sources the ideals of private life that fascinated their perspicacious authors.”<sup>45</sup> Or, as Natalie Z. Davis expands on the thought, “[A] book or a proverb not only could speak for its author or reader, but could be a clue to relationships among groups of people and among cultural traditions.”<sup>46</sup> It does not matter whether the document is primarily aesthetic, cultural, personal, or more purely historical. Because ideas do not exist in a vacuum, history cannot be adequately interpreted outside the society that gave it birth.

No well-trained historian or critic would today deny that creative works form a significant, well-integrated part of that tapestry created by a period’s economic, social, and political beliefs and values. It is the way individuals think and feel about a society that characterizes them and their times, marking their differences from people that preceded and followed them. This is true for all periods, but I would go further and argue that, especially for investigation of the late eighteenth century in France, literary study is absolutely essential. Given the limited number of primary sources, a broad education in the novels, plays, poems, and essays of the period can add extraordinary richness to our understanding of these people of long ago. In short, the literature of the day, tested against historical and sociological works, without neglecting other pertinent archives, allows us to go far in perceiving the character of the French and in sensing, for example, the treatment of children, the anxieties represented by divorce, or people’s longing to escape to another world, whether to America, the South Pacific and Asia, or elsewhere. Discovering such significant attitudes that stand a good chance of reflecting the reality of the time requires a large literary sample, significant congruence, and regular testing against other sources. Both the financing of publication and the growing numbers of readers offer reasons for trusting late eighteenth-century novels, poems, and plays, particularly when “fictive” reality is tested against other archives and when historians demand a multiplicity of examples that reveal congruence of significance.

## NOTES

1 The question I pose is somewhat different from those that have previously interested scholars. Lionel Gossman, "History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 3–39; Jean Serroy, "Le roman et l'histoire au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle avant Saint-Réal," *Studi francesi* 37, no. 2 (1993): 243–50; and Herbert Lindenberger, *The History in Literature: On Value, Genre, Institutions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), have, for example, been drawn to the period when history became a genre distinct from novels and other genres like biography and scientific treatises. Leo Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), agrees with most others that these distinctions took place in the eighteenth century. He goes on to analyze the ways literature differs from history. Aristotle (*Poetics*, chap. 9) and many, many others have taken up the latter issue. See, for just a few examples, Louis O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in Canary and Kozicki's collection *The Writing of History*, 129–49; David H. Walker, "Literature, History and Factidiversity," *Journal of European Studies* 25 (1995): 35–50; Paul Hernadi, "Clio's Cousins: Historiography as Translation, Fiction, and Criticism," *New Literary History* 7, no. 2 (1976): 247–56; Murray Krieger, "Fiction, History, and Empirical Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (1974): 335–60; and P. M. Wetherill, "The Novel and Historical Discourse: Notes on a Nineteenth-Century Perspective," *Journal of European Studies* 15 (1985): 117–30.

2 For example, Lucien Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: La religion de Rabelais* (Paris: A. Michel, 1968); Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986); Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Deirdre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992); Susan Dunn, *The Deaths of Louis XVI* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). It should be emphasized that each of these scholars turns to literature in different ways and for different reasons. I owe the last reference, and the next (note 3), to Philippe Carrard.

3 In more modern terms, "[T]he referential status of fiction is always in doubt. . . . [E]vidence derived from literature about specific historical change in the short term is inherently problematic" (Philip Stewart, "This Is Not a Book Review: On Historical Uses of Literature," *Journal of Modern History* 66 [1994]: 524).

4 I do not intend with these terms to curtail excessively the feelings, points of view, and patterns of perception and experience that are the ultimate object of much culture studies and cultural history. Simon During writes of "questions of pleasure, corporeality, fantasy, identification, affect, desire, critique, transgression" (introduction to *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1993], 19); J. M. Roberts, of "states of mind, conscious and unconscious assumptions, attitudes, prejudices, and emotions" (*The French Revolution* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978], 155); Clifford Geertz, of "customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters," as a set of "control mechanisms—

plans, recipes, rules, instructions . . . for the governing of behavior" (*The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], 44); Fred Inglis and Stuart Levine, of "values" (*Culture Studies* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993] and "Art, Values, Institutions and Culture: An Essay in American Studies Methodology and Relevance," *American Quarterly* 24 [1972]: 131–65); and Michel Foucault, of "experience," that is, "the deployment of a unity made up of rules and norms, some traditional, some new, which rest on religious, judicial, pedagogical, medical institutions, as well as changes in the way individuals are brought to attribute sense and value to their conduct, to their duties, to their pleasures, to their sentiments and sensations, to their dreams" (*Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 2 [Paris: Gallimard, 1984], 10–11). Each of these factors represents worthy goals for investigation. It is, of course, essential, as I argue below, to understand that each of these attributes, mind-sets, heterotopias, beliefs, or whatever, is but a part of the enormous set or web of integrated relationships that constitutes the particular culture in a moment of society.

5 Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From 1793–1799*, trans. John Hall Stewart and James Friguglietti (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 2: 271. See, also, Roderick Phillips, who notes that "the Revolution, considered as a political event, rarely intrudes into the levels of family and personal life" (*Family Breakdown in Late Eighteenth-Century France: Divorces in Rouen 1792–1803* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980], 2). As Philippe Ariès writes in a particular instance, "The fact that today we can no longer behave with the same lack of self-consciousness and sincerity in the same situations as our two sixteenth-century princes indicates precisely that a change of attitude has come between them and us" ("L'histoire des mentalités," *La nouvelle histoire*, ed. Jacques Le Goffe [1978; repr., Paris: Complexe, 1988], 168). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

6 Compare David Hume: "It is universally acknowledged, that there is great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. . . . Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the GREEKS and ROMANS? Study well the temper and actions of the FRENCH and ENGLISH: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former *most* of the observations, which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular" (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000], 64).

7 Michel Vovelle, "Pertinence et ambiguïté du témoignage littéraire," *Idéologies & Mentalités* (Paris: Maspéro, 1982), 45.

8 Marie-Claude Phan, *Les amours illégitimes: Histoires de séduction en languedoc (1676–1786)* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1986).

9 Alain Lottin, introduction to *La désunion du couple sous l'ancien régime: L'exemple du nord*, ed. Alain Lottin (Lille: Université de Lille, 1975), 28.

10 Jacques Dupâquier, "La population française de 1789 à 1806," in vol. 3 of *Histoire de la population française*, ed. J. Dupâquier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 64. See, also, the volume's preceding study by Dupâquier and René le Mée, "La connaissance des faits démographiques de 1789 à 1914," 15–30.

11 Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), xiii.

12 James F. Traer, *Marriage and the Family in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 95.

13 Sarah Maza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 5 (1996): 1495.

14 Lucien Febvre, "La sensibilité et l'histoire: Comment reconstituer la vie affective d'autrefois?" *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1953), 234–35.

15 Of course, as Stewart suggests, by limiting oneself to a single work, more precision is possible (537–38); see, also, Lynn Hunt, "The Objects of History: A Reply to Philip Stewart," *Journal of Modern History* 66 (1994): 541.

- 16 Robert Mandrou, *De la culture populaire aux 17e et 18e siècles: La bibliothèque bleue de Troyes* (1964; repr., Paris: Imago, 1985); and Geneviève Bollème, *La bible bleue: Anthologie d'une littérature 'populaire'* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975).
- 17 Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris, pendant la première moitié du XIXe siècle* (1958; repr., Paris: Hachette, 1984), 115.
- 18 Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 18. Elsewhere, he goes further: "Bon mots and ballads tended to vanish and be forgotten. But books fixed themes in print, preserving them, diffusing them, and multiplying their effect. Even more important, books incorporated them in stories with broad persuasive power. An anecdote or an irreverent aside was one thing in a café, another in a printed book. The transformation into print actually altered its meaning, because books blended seemingly trivial elements into large-scale narratives, which often opened up perspectives into philosophy and history" (*The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1995], 190). See, also, his review article, "The Symbolic Element in History," *Journal of Modern History* 58, no. 1 (1986): 218–34. Natalie Zemon Davis has been particularly sensitive to the interpretive importance of literariness; see her short discussion of how she has managed the potentially disruptive influence of literature for a historian, "The Historian and Literary Uses," *Profession 2003* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2003), 21–27.
- 19 Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 36–37.
- 20 Cary Nelson—who recognizes that in literary studies critics believe that texts "shape and limit their meaning internally," while "[c]ultural studies typically maintains that meaning is the product of social, cultural, and political interaction"—calls for an "alliance," a "merging" of the two ("The Linguisticity of Cultural Studies: Rhetoric, Close Reading, and Contextualization," in *At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Thomas Rosteck [New York: Guilford, 1999], 213–14). Although neither of these varieties of interpretation can ever be more than partially isolated from the other, as Jan Mukarovsky cogently argues in his classic *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* (trans. Mark E. Suino, Michigan Slavic Contributions, no. 3 [Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages, University of Michigan Press, 1970]), I would rather say that there should be a chronological sequence where the "relatively autonomous cultural domain" (Nelson, "Linguisticity," 215) of the literary text remains as isolated as possible until it is understood as an aesthetic complex. At that point, one may fit it into the much larger system of cultural relationships.
- 21 Richard Johnson, "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" in *What Is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London: Arnold, 1996), 94.
- 22 Mandrou, *De la culture populaire*, 23.
- 23 Roger Chartier, "Histoire intellectuelle et histoire des mentalités: Trajectoires et questions," *Revue de synthèse* 3, nos. 111–12 (1983): 298. See, also, Mandrou, *De la culture populaire*, 23; Allan H. Pasco, *Sick Heroes: French Society and Literature in the Romantic Age, 1750–1850* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 3–6.
- 24 Balzac, *Les employés*, vol. 7, *La comédie humaine*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1976–81), 892.
- 25 Jacques Le Goff, "Les mentalités: Une histoire ambiguë," in *Faire de l'histoire: Nouveaux objets*, ed. J. Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 3: 87–88. Vovelle is willing to open history to the arts, especially in respect to sensitivity ("Pertinence et ambiguïté," 37–50). Neither he nor the others that use literature provide a way to test the reliability of such materials.
- 26 Le Goff, "Mentalités," 87–88.
- 27 Daniel Roche, *Le peuple de Paris: Essai sur la culture populaire au XVIIIe siècle* (1981; repr., Paris: Fayard, 1998), 63.

28 Georges May, *Le dilemme du roman au XVIIIe siècle: Etude sur les rapports du roman et de la critique (1715–1761)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963); Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 120–21. Realism is one of the most common claims of the eighteenth-century novel. In 1765, François-Georges Fouques Desfontaines announces, “I myself saw with my own eyes what I recount” (*Lettres de Sophie et du chevalier de \*\**, pour servir de supplément aux Lettres du Marquis de Roselle, par M. de \*\*\*, 2 parts [London and Paris: Esclapart, 1765], vi); in 1788, Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre insists that the story is “true for the principal events” (*Paul et Virginie*, ed. Pierre Trahard [Paris: Garnier, 1964], 201); in 1790, the abbé Guillaume-André-René Baston assures at the outset that he will be “simple & true” (*Narrations d’Omaï, insulaire de la mer du sud, ami et compagnon de voyage du capitaine Cook, Ouvrage traduit de l’O-Taïtien, par M. K\*\*\*, & publié par le Capitaine L. A. B.*, vol. 1 [Rouen: Le Boucher le jeune, and Paris: Buisson, 1790], 1); in 1792, François-Amédée Doppet claims, “[T]he author himself witnessed the things he tells” (*Le commissionnaire de la ligue d’Outre-Rhin, ou le messager nocturne, contenant l’histoire de l’émigration française, les aventures galantes et politiques arrivées aux chevaliers français, et à leurs dames dans les pays étrangers, des instructions sur leurs projets contre-révolutionnels, et des notices sur tous les moyens tentés ou à tenter contre la constitution, par un François qui fait sa confession générale et qui rentre dans sa patrie* [Paris: Buisson & Lyon, Bruyset frères, 1792], vii); in 1793, Claude-François-Xavier Mercier de Compiègne humbly asserts, “In my tale I will at least have the merit of being true” (*Ismaël et Christine, nouvelle historique*, nouvelle édition [1793; repr., Paris: Louis, Year III (1795)], 10); in 1799, Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Nougaret calls his story “this true story” (*Paris métamorphosé, ou Histoire de Gilles-Claude Ragot, pendant son séjour dans cette ville centrale de la République française, où l’on voit, avec le récit de ses aventures merveilleuses, les ruses, tromperies, astuces, finesses, etc., etc., qu’il y a éprouvées, et auxquelles tous les citoyens sont en butte. Ouvrage qui peut faire suite aux Astuces et tromperies de Paris, etc. etc., et rédigé d’après des mémoires authentiques* [Paris: Chez l’auteur et Desenne, Year VII (1799)], i); and so on. Carolyn A. Durham insists that “Realism [is] the great innovation of the eighteenth-century novel,” though she quotes Philip Stewart to put the matter in proper perspective: “However extravagant, however unlikely, however much it may strain credulity, [eighteenth-century novelists] claim it is all true” (“The Contradictory Becomes Coherent: *La religieuse* and *Paul et Virginie*,” *Eighteenth Century* 23, no. 3 [1982]: 232).

29 I am only interested in the relationship between literature and contemporary reality, though, of course, realism varies through the ages. As Father René Rapin said, “The verisimilar is whatever conforms to public opinion” (quoted from Jean-Pierre Caillaud, “Galanterie et histoire de ‘l’antiquité moderne’: Jean Chapelain, *De la lecture des vieux romans*, 1647,” *Dix-septième siècle* 50.3 [1998]: 401).

30 Bollème, *Bible bleue*, 25.

31 Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 68–70.

32 Geneviève Bollème, “Littérature populaire et littérature de colportage au 18e siècle,” in *Livre et société dans la France du XVIIIe siècle*, ed. G. Bollème and others, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1965), I, 65; Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 47. See, also, Mandrou, *De la culture populaire*, 17, 39–49.

33 Mme Germaine Necker de Staël, preface to *Delphine*, ed. Simone Balayé and Lucia Omacini, 2 vols., *Textes Littéraires Français* (1802; Geneva: Droz, 1987), 81.

34 I take this conclusion from chapter 1 of C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), where he discusses the invention of fantasy. For a bibliography of my own reading, though only half as long as it would be today, see *Sick Heroes*, 217–24.

- 35 Denis Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste* (1796), reprinted in *Ceuvres romanesques*, ed. Henri Bénac (Paris: Garnier, 1962), 505.
- 36 Pasco, "Incest in the Mirror," *Sick Heroes*, 108–32.
- 37 See, also, Pasco, "Reading the Age of Names in *A la recherche du temps perdu*," *Comparative Literature* 46 (1994): 267–87.
- 38 Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 26–27.
- 39 Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, introduction to *Cultural Studies*, ed. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2.
- 40 Carolyn Steedman, "Women's Biography and Autobiography: Forms of History, Histories of Form," in *From My Guy to Sci-Fi*, ed. Helen Carr (London: Pandora, 1989), 98–111.
- 41 Pasco, "The Unrocked Cradle," *Sick Heroes*, 31–52.
- 42 Pasco, "On Making Mirages, Tahitian and Otherwise," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 77, no. 2 (2001): 247–61.
- 43 Natalie Zemon Davis, "Ghosts, Kin, and Progeny: Some Features of Family Life in Early Modern France," *Daedalus* 106, no. 2 (1977): 87–114.
- 44 James Smith Allen, *Popular French Romanticism: Authors, Readers, and Books in the 19th Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981); and Françoise Parent-Lardeur, *Lire à Paris au temps de Balzac: Les cabinets de lecture à Paris, 1830–1850* (Paris: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1981). Louis Chevalier quotes Balzac's contemporaries, George Sand and Baudelaire, who marvel at the accuracy of *La comédie humaine*, and takes a similar, very strong position himself: "*La comédie humaine*: document d'histoire?" *Revue Historique* 232, no. 1 (1964): 27–48.
- 45 Michelle Perrot, "The Family Triumphant," *From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, ed. Michelle Perrot, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *History of Private Life* 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 134. Similarly, David Powell points out, "[T]he historical content of the novels themselves has been surprisingly little studied" ("The Historical Novel: History as Fiction and Fiction as History," *The Historian* 43 [1994]: 13). For suggestive essays, see, in addition, Febvre, "La sensibilité et l'histoire," 221–38; and, in the same volume, his "Une vue d'ensemble: Histoire et psychologie," 207–20; Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses*, esp. 69–259; Mandrou, *Introduction to Modern France, 1500–1640: An Essay in Historical Psychology*, trans. R. E. Hallmark (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976); Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "L'ethnographie à la Rétif," *Le territoire de l'historien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 2: 337–97; and *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989). For an excellent overview, see James Smith Allen, "History and the Novel: *Mentalité* in Modern Popular Fiction," *History and Theory* 22, no. 3 (1983), 233–52.
- 46 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), xvii. Stephen Greenblatt observes that "[l]iterature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 4). See, also, Maza, "Stories in History," 1493–1515. As Marxists like Leon Trotsky (*Literature and Revolution* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960]), and Geörg Lukács (*Balzac et le réalisme français* [Paris: Maspero, 1967]) insisted, literature is both a reflection of the reality of its time and a significant influence on the future. In my own study here, I am interested only in the reflective capabilities of literary works. Poststructuralism has left some with no reason to believe that literature is ever directly reflective; nonetheless, with sufficient precautions it has much to teach us about the past.