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Historicist Inquiry in The New Historicism and British Historiographic Metafiction

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ÖZET

Bu makale “Yeni Tarihselcilik” kuramının tarihi metinlere, söylemine ve tarih kavramına getirdiği sorgulama ve eleştirel bakışın son dönem İngiliz romanında nasıl kurgusal düzlemde incelendiğini tartışmaktadır. “Yeni Tarihselcilik” kuramının edebiyat eleştirisinde ve tarih araştırmalarında tartışmaya açtığı önemli fikirlerin ve eleştirel yöntemlerin, tarihi olayları ve kişileri postmodern bir yapı içinde kurgusallaştıran İngiliz romanında kullanımı, ve kurgusal gerçek/ tarihi gerçeklik arasındaki ikilemin ortadan kalkması bu makalenin ana temasını oluşturmaktadır. Roman ve kuram arasındaki paralellik ve tarih metinleriyle edebiyat metinlerinin yazılımındaki ortak özellikler örneklerle incelenmekte, ve sonuç olarak tarih yazılımı ve roman sanatı arasındaki benzerliklere dikkat çekilmektedir.

One of the resurgent new trends in British metafiction is the revival of interest in history. Significantly history means both “historiography”- a particular discursive discipline- and “history”- the actual events this discipline investigates. Since history signifies both a form of discourse about facts and facts themselves, it has been the major focus of attention in contemporary critical theory over the past decade in Britain and the U.S. Now at the end of the 1990s this interest in history has become the central critical concern of the contemporary novelists in Britain. British fiction today has discovered an important means of articulating not only its rich cultural heritage but also the ongoing contemporary debate on historical studies. The kind of novel this article will focus on is well- known as historiographic metafiction. The historiographers’ interrogation of the discourses of history, and their inquiry into the nature of the “truth of history,” have gone into the fictional fabrics of British historiographic metafiction. The issue of the

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textuality of history is at the center of this fiction which is "at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past"(Hutcheon 1989:3). The return to history, however, is a problematic issue as Linda Hutcheon has maintained:

it is a return made problematic by overtly metafictional assertions of both history and literature as human constructs, indeed as human illusions- necessary, but none the less illusory for all that. The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction enacts, in a way, the views of certain contemporary historiographers.... it offers a sense of the presence of the past, but this is a past that can only be known from its texts, its traces, be they literary or historical.(1989: 4)

By stating that the past can only be known from its texts Linda Hutcheon was pointing to the textuality of history the issue of which has generated a remarkably theorized body of a "new" philosophy of history. This article considers the implications of this theory in the recent metafictional texts. I will be arguing here on the shared theoretical assumptions in history and fiction with the main purpose of indicating how British historiographic metafiction engages in common concerns with the influential form of literary criticism that has come to be known as the New Historicism, and with the new philosophy of history which has been especially informed by the famous "linguistic turn" that, as John Zammito observes, "has swept through the humanities over the past twenty years and that, by 1980, became the concern even of (intellectual) historians"¹ (1993: 784).

Ever since the new historicism has engaged poststructuralist theory, the concept of "textuality" has informed the practice of the new historicism. The idea of the textuality of history and the issue of narrative are now at the heart of contemporary historical theory. As Hayden White notes in *The Content of the Form*, "In contemporary historical theory the topic of narrative has been the subject of extraordinarily intense debate"(1987: 26). The origins of this debate can be traced back to the publication of his seminal work *Metahistory*, in 1973, which develops an influential theory of historical narrative. In White's view history is a form of discourse which is grounded within four fundamental literary tropes: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche and Irony. In his words,

1) Zammito refers to John Toews's review essay, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience" [*American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 879-907]. This was a response to the publication of *Modern European Intellectual History* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982) by La Capra and Stanley Kaplan (eds), after the Cornell conference in 1980.

“the historical field is constituted as a possible domain of analysis in a linguistic act which is tropological in nature”(1973: 430). For White historical writing involves “the arrangement of selected events...into a story” which he calls “emplotment”(1973: 7): “Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of particular kind”(1973: 7). Historians fashion their narratives according to four different modes of emplotment: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire. Structuring historical narratives around these four story forms links history and literature. White’s emphasis of the literary aspect of historical writing has not only opened an ever-growing debate over historical studies, but also determined the politics of historical interpretation. In “Historical Text as a Literary Artifact,” White’s assertion becomes more emphatic: “Historians may not like to think of their work as translations of ‘fact’ into ‘fiction;’ but this is one of the effects of their works”(1978: 53):

History thrives on the discovery of all the possible plot-structures that might be invoked to endow sets of events with different meanings. And our understanding of the past increases precisely in the degree to which we succeed in determining how far that past conforms to the strategies of sense-making that are contained in their purest forms in literary art. (1978: 53)

Similarly, in its formal linking of history and fiction, the novel explores their problematic relation. Both historical and literary texts are products of linguistic operations of language, and they are manifestly marked by their nature of textuality. It is the common ground of textualism that links historical and fictional writing in a synchronic configuration. Thus reading these two disciplines within the new historicist theory brings them into evident synergy.² The critical intent and effect of the new historicist view of historical narratives as “verbal artifacts” find their echoes most notably in British historiographic metafiction which overtly problematizes its claims to historical veracity. The interactive use of the literary and historical texts and intertexts functions as a formal marking of historicity, especially in the novels of such authors as Peter Ackroyd, D.M. Thomas, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Ian Watson, Jeanette Winterson, A.S. Byatt, Penelope Fitzgerald, Lawrence Norfolk, Ross King, Robert Irwin, and Derek Beaven, among so many others in the 1980s and 90s. Not surprisingly then, the theoretical questioning of historical narratives has coincided with a similar querying, in the novel, of the nature of representations of the past. That the authoritarian discourse of reality only pre-

2) I borrow his term from Zammito, meaning cooperation, or collaboration.

sents a certain vision of reality has already been challenged by the postmodern theories of the novel. "Representation, as a theoretical issue" writes Thomas Docherty, "and its problematization has made it into a major area of contention in the debate around postmodernism"(1990:97). Arguing on the historicity of representation, Docherty demystifies the conventional notion of representation as reference to empirical history. He suggests that "The end of representation (or at least of our previous geo-political understanding of representation as mimesis) means the beginning of prolepsis, a writing of the poetry of the future which will escape the merely aesthetic realm and will reinstate history"(1990: 119).

The linguistic nature of historical writing has been the focal point of interpretive strategies of the new historicist criticism. Taking the issue that historical texts are discursive practices, and the view that literary texts, like historical narratives, form cultural discourses, the new historicist approach asserts the importance of multiple versions of the past as produced within and by these discourses. Hence the problematic notion of representation. As Hans Kellner remarks, "any ideology that claims to represent some reality principle becomes epiphenomenal"(1989:207)³. According to Kellner, all representational modes distort reality, and they are deceptive: "The least deceptive form of representation is the one that points most self-consciously to its status as a system of effects"(1989: 105). It is obvious that Hayden White's argument that historical narratives are verbal fictions have been taken far toward a textualism by a considerable number of theorists, like Kellner. Others, who develop the textualist politics, include Dominick La Capra, Louise Montrose, F.R. Ankersmit, Lionel Gossman, Robert F. Berkhofer, Stephen Bann, and Louis O. Mink.⁴ Their self-conscious investigation of what Montrose calls, "historicity of texts and the textuality of history," gains utmost significance in the understanding of historical narratives and their relation to literature. Montrose defines his terms in his essay "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture:"

By the *historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing- also the texts in which we study them. By the *textuality of history*, I mean to suggest firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question- traces

3) 'Epiphenomenal' means by-product of the self-determining activity of an abstract principle, i.e. Reason .

4) Along with the inventor of the new historicism Stephen Greenblatt, these scholars are mostly associated with Renaissance studies.

whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the "documents" upon which historians ground their own texts, called "histories." (1989: 20)

The implication of this view is that interpreting history as textual reconstruction inevitably leads to the erasure of the distinction between fiction and factuality. The past is always the historian's construction, and as such it possesses no authoritative materiality. Then, indeed, we cannot have access to the past without its textualized versions. This argument, that we can only know the past in its textual traces, has initiated a wide array of theoretical discussion among the new historicists. F.R. Ankersmit, for example, takes this stance in his article "Statements, Texts and Pictures," by stating that "it is true that [history] always manifests itself to us in the form of text" (1995: 253). Elsewhere he has written: "There is no past that is given to us and to which we could compare these two or more texts in order to find out which of them does correspond to the past and which does not" (qtd. in Zammito 1993: 79). In *The Inventions of History*, Stephen Bann makes a similar claim: "no one can deny that historiography is a form of writing" (1990: 35). Lionel Gossman's thesis is the same when he argues that there are "no firm boundaries separating literary from other forms of writing" (Bann 1990: 36). In his book *Between History and Literature*, Gossman discusses the relations between history and fiction by drawing from the past historical tradition which saw no distinction between the two. As he states, "The actual development of each...reveals both great similarities and some significant tensions. Since each is realized in and through narrative..." (1990: 233). The recurrent comparison of historical narrative to literary form also appears in Louis O. Mink's work. In "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," Mink argues that "so narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of individual imagination" (1978: 145). Mink concludes his essay by claiming that "narrative history and narrative fiction move closer together than common sense could well accept" (1978: 148). Evidently the poststructuralist concept of textuality has generated an ongoing debate, and has initiated the problematic grounding of history in literary forms. Marjorie Levinson, a notable scholar of Romanticism and a new historicist critic, candidly admits, however, that in their practice they need a framework to explain "the objective value" of this criticism:

We want to articulate the literatures of the past in such a way

as to accommodate the contingency of the present-the wilfulness of our textual politics- and at the same time, to configure that freedom with the particular past that is retextualized. We want a framework that will explain the objective value of a belated criticism, one which reads into the work anticipations that we are *not* present in the text's contemporary life, only in its posthumous existence, an existence that turns around and *plants itself* in the past.(1989: 22)

This framework can be found within the narrative structures of historiographic metafiction which recontextualizes both the production and receptive processes of history, and invites us to consider historical knowledge by showing the *process* of creating the *product*. What especially characterizes British historiographic metafiction is this double viewing, and its simultaneous absorption and challenge of the old and new paradigms. This was the most manifest issue found in the novels published in the 1980s where historical reconstruction appears in full process, and historical product as a textualized past. The novels offer interesting versions of different historical events, individuals or societies. Moreover, the relationship between history and fiction is playfully interactive in many of these novels. In Graham Swift's *Waterland*, for example, the critical and subversive elements of narrative function in such a way as to expose the implicit claims of narrative to the "truth of history." Here the storytelling aspect of narrative is used to highlight the idea of history as a text among other texts. The history teacher Henry Crick repeatedly tells his students that "history is just story-telling"(1984:133), and that "history merges with fiction, fact gets blurred with fable..."(1984:180). Crick plays with the new historicist idea of history as a form of story which, he believes, is always woven out of the fabric of fables. Then the novel posits that *History* as a Grand Narrative is a conventional illusion. In such novels, "History...becomes a self-confessed product of our interpretations," to use Paul Hamilton's words (1993: 114). Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare* is another striking example. It is set in Cairo in 1486, and shows the process of the textualization of history through the narrator who continually reminds us of the importance of narrativization: "a good storyteller strives to give his stories some shape, even if they are true ones" (1987: 48). Since Irwin is himself a medieval historian, his novel is fashioned like a historical fantasy echoing White's idea of emplotment in its Romance mode. We are alerted to this mode of emplotment in the very beginning by the narrator who says he wants to write a guidebook, or a romance, "a guidebook cast in the form of a romance, or a romance cast in the form of a guidebook..." (1987:11). This novel presents history as plural stories in their purest forms, since it is fashioned around *The Thousand and One Nights*.

What emerges as the dominant point of such novels is the positioning of the histori-

cal context within a literary foreground. Then, as Paul Hamilton writes in a complaining tone, "history becomes nothing but the stories people tell...(1993: 113). Although this reduction ignores the nonnarrative side of history, it is precisely the point what historiographers cannot easily avoid. This point, however, has a greater validity for the practice of the novelists. Many historiographic metafiction published in the 1990s in Britain are complicit with this issue, that the textuality of history inevitably produces many viewpoints and voices in histories. These novels are concerned with the multiple versions of historical discourse in order to offer an enhancement of our understanding of historical contexts and the processes of their production. They are especially interested in reflexive representations of history, which results in a self-critical and self-conscious outlook in their constructions of the past.

A typical new historicist reflexivity operates in the narrative structure of such novels as Derek Beaven's *Newton's Niece* (1995), Peter Ackroyd's *The Trial of Elizabeth Cree* (1995), Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* (1996) Lawrence Norfolk's *Lemprière's Dictionary* (1992) and A.S.Byatt's *Babel Tower* (1997) to cite only a few examples. Their purpose is to show both history and fiction to be necessary human constructs. Whatever their use of different historical milieus and cultural discourses of the past, such novels contest the entire notion of History as a Grand Narrative and of historical meaning as something centralized or fixed within one generally accepted version. By rewriting the past these novels produce it, and as such the meanings of history. By wilfully recognizing the position that every text is a fusion of the textualized past, these novels signal a thematic and structural connection to the new historicist theory, and thus enact the new historicist notion of historiography as narrativization rather than naive representation.

The new historicist view of both history and fiction partaking of similar literary tropes and narrative modes comes from Paul Ricoeur's proposition that "history and fiction together form a 'grand narratology'" (Kellner 1989:102). For Ricoeur, grand narratology constitutes our culture at large, and defines human reality itself. He suggests that all understanding of meaning in time is a narrative understanding⁵ (Kellner 1989:8). The essence of narrativization includes storytelling as 'narrative proper' which Hayden White's *Metahistory* has already widely theorized as a means of explanation of the past. Accordingly, understanding historical events requires giving of an *account* for them which is invariably realized in the form of telling a story. We can only make sense of any human event or experience in the form of a story. Hence the inseparability of historical events from textuality.

Historical narratives also reconstruct "context" as they write the past as history. The

5) See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol.I, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, 1984).

basis for historical textualization involves both the context within “constructed histories [historians] represent the past as history” (Berkhofer 1995: 243), and the historian as author constructing or writing histories. Then, historical discourse becomes unavoidably reflexive. As Berkhofer succinctly emphasizes: “Just as voice and viewpoint in histories ought to be multiple, so the practice of history as discourse ought to be reflexive” (1995:243). This means that historical texts refer to the past which they themselves bring into existence by means of their literary devices. In other words, reflexivity entails projecting the past through language.

Reflexivity applies to historical discourse in terms of making use of multiple contexts in constructing textualizations of history. The context of the social, cultural and political phenomena of the past determines and is determined by the context of the historian within his own time. These dual contexts interact and coalesce in the historical text. Historical textualization both draws from and creates the contexts in question. The textuality of history and historicity of texts together make historical textualization inevitably reflexive. In this respect, as Berkhofer puts it, “reflexive contextualization requires multiple and explicit contexts in a history to represent the interaction between present-day intertextual ways of (con)textualizing and presenting the past contextualized as a history text” (1995: 244). As Zammito points out, “this notion of ‘contextualization’ is central to historical practice” (1993:791)⁶. It is the main method of historical understanding. This “new” sense of context is something “read out by the historical critic in the ‘fractures’ of texts striving vainly for coherence. There is no coherence to be found- not at the level of the work, the author, or the society, but the ‘*contestations*’ (in older terminology, ‘contradictions’) in all of them can be ‘reconstructed’” (Zammito 1993: 791-92).

It is important to note that the method of contextualization involves narrativization. The historian’s choice of the narrative model affects the formation of historical discourse just as much as the context of the historian’s own time of writing which becomes part of the discursive practice itself. In fact it is Dominick La Capra’s notion of “multiple, interactive contexts” that has initiated the contextual inquiry in relation to historical narratives. La Capra considers “the problem of how to read texts or documents” and the problem of relating them “to processes of contextual understanding” (1989: 4). The novel today relates in significant ways to this debate in its desire to penetrate into the nature of historical knowledge and the processes of (con)textualizing this knowledge. In John Banville’s novels, for example, the discourses of science and historical identity provide exemplary psychological and discursive structures, harvesting new historicist interpretations concerning the nature of knowledge itself. Various narrative modes in the

6) What these critics call, ‘the new sense of context,’ signifies the narrativity of historical knowledge which produces a collapse of the text-context distinction.

novels embody the conventions of the history genre. Interactions between history and literary textualizations indicate how discourses are presented as history. Historical discourse dissolves into literary historization in the contextualization process to reveal how history constitutes itself as a specific discourse. Banville shows how narrativization of history draws from metafictional novels in the customary methods of textualization, intertextuality being one of them; as well as how metafiction draws from historical discourse. In this framework, Banville's novels contest some self-evident truths or identities in historical constructions, and especially in the context of scientific discourse.

Banville presents examples of postmodern contextualization in his *Kepler* (1981), *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), *The Newton Letter* (1982), *The Book of Evidence* (1989) and *Ghosts* (1993). In the first two novels he creates fictional biographies of the real historical figures who have religious convictions of their scientific discoveries. "To enquire into nature," says Kepler "is to trace geometrical relationships"(1993:145). In their search for the 'real' truths, however, as historical figures, Kepler and Copernicus, encounter the impossibility of this desire. They realize that scientific knowledge always runs into its limits, and that there is no self-evident truth, no absolute scientific knowledge. In the final pages of *Doctor Copernicus*, the failure of science to grasp knowledge as such becomes clear to the dying Copernicus who is visited by the ghost of his brother Andreas. "It is the manner of knowing that is important" (1990: 239), says Andreas to the disillusioned Copernicus: "We know the meaning of the singular thing only so long as we content ourselves with knowing it in the midst of other meanings: isolate it, and all meaning drains away. It is not the thing that counts, you see, only the interaction of things; and of course, the names..." (1990: 239). It is this idea of the manner of "the interaction of things" that the new historicist practice investigates in understanding historical knowledge, and historiographic metafiction embodies in their contextualizations of the past.

This self-conscious dimension of history reinforces the process of reflecting the historical discourses in a literary historization in novels like Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* which reconstructs the early life of Fritz von Hardenberg before he came to be known as the famous German Romantic poet Novalis. Here, the possibility of achieving "universal knowledge" is probed by the young Novalis who concerns himself with "the problem of universal language"(1996:61) which he believes is possible if "God disposes"(1996: 62). But he comes to realize that "Language refers only to itself, it is not the key to anything higher(1996:75), thus echoing, in a similar manner, the querying of Copernicus and Kepler. Another example to literary historization is Lawrence Norfolk's *The Pope's Rhinoceros* (1996) which presents itself to the reader as a by-product of historical research. Here Renaissance Rome with its political intrigues, the unceasing strife in the central Italian states, and the events in a tribe in the West African rainforest are

inscribed as the narratives grounded in historical documentation. The primacy of the meaning of history and of narrative in the realist mode of writing come under scrutiny within the multiple contexts of the novel. Moreover they are self-consciously challenged by fashioning history as fable. In the search for rhinoceros the mythic dimension of history is revealed as one of its many (con)textualizations. While references to the historical events generate an effect of reality, the fabulist texture of the novel adds richness to its construction of the images of the past. This flowing narrative discourse creates its own historical meanings where history becomes mythologized by its very story-telling aspect. This novel seems to be positing what Roland Barthes states, that "myth is a type of speech chosen by history"(1973: 118).

Historiographic metafiction installs this polymorphous sense of 'context' in a number of ways. We may witness the reconstruction of a dominant mode of discourse as representing the historical reality the novel addresses but only to challenge it by drawing attention to the presence of other discourses within that historical past. This is seen in the novels of Peter Ackroyd, especially in *Hawksmoor* (1985) where the dominant discourse of rationality is contested by a parallel esoteric and diabolical discourse which was as much part of the "Age of Reason" as was Reason. We may encounter a specific historical context fully fictionalized in great detail as a reminder of the conventions of historical novel, but intertextual references to present theoretical concerns over language and ideology, representation and narrative, subvert the effect of that context as a unified field in itself. This is evident in the novels of Jeanette Winterson, such as *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), *Boating for Beginners* (1985) and *The Passion* (1987), in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), as well as in A.S. Byatt's *Babel Tower* (1997). There is a certain sense of anachronism in such novels used for the purpose of demystifying the understanding of historical contexts as extratextual knowledge. In A. S. Byatt's *Babel Tower*, which recounts the two parallel tales, one concerning the 1960s English scene in the humanities, and the other a pastiche of the 18th century desire to construct an ideal community devoted wholly to the realization of pure freedom, problematizes the connection between life and literature. *Babel Tower* repeatedly undermines its historical context as a unified trace by overt references to the Romantic theory of the mystery of "Oneness" and its impossibility in life and art. The ambitious female character of the novel, Frederica, directs our attention to this issue: "...only connect, the mystic Oneness, and her word comes back to her again, more insistently: laminations. Laminations. Keeping things separate. Not linked by metaphor or sex or desire, but separate objects of knowledge, systems of work, or discovery"(359). What emerges from this understanding is the acknowledgement of the presence of the reality of life and literature as multiple, interactive texts.

The juxtaposition of past and present in the contextualization process is another

method the novelists employ in their playful versions of the past. Derek Beaven's *Newton's Niece* is an example to this method where he links the 18th and 20th centuries by the presence of Newton's niece in each. "We write our own story on the walls of our world; we project ourselves on to our account of the past- and the future"(7), she says speaking from within both centuries she inhabits "as a fragment," which she claims "mysteriously contained the whole microcosm"(119). The reality of the niece's past and present in both the 18th and the 20th centuries turns into 'interactive contexts' which the novelist exposes as 'texts' whose historicity open the complex cultural traces of the past to be reinterpreted.

What these novels fundamentally harvest is the idea that the reality of the past is constituted by multiple historical texts; therefore, the context is viewed as a "text." In La Capra's words, "the context itself is a text of sorts." For La Capra, understanding 'context' means, "a matter of inquiry into the interacting relationships among a set of more or less pertinent contexts" (qtd. in Zammito 1993:792). Zammito's explanation of La Capra's notion of context is important to quote here, because, as he aptly puts it, La Capra does not take context to be a "synchronic whole," but rather as "multiple, interacting contexts"(1993:792). Zammito's discussion of La Capra's notion of the interactivity of texts with one another and with contexts in complex ways, is a legitimate explanation of the notion of the new contextualization in history. It highlights the intertextual reading of texts undercutting the idea of context as a totalized or unified structure. Continuing the line of La Capra's argument Zammito states that, just as historical documents provide for a rich historical interpretation presented in contextualization, literary texts also function as such. In his words: "And literary works may well serve as the richest evidence for the complexity of the historical epoch in which they are embedded"(1993: 793). We can take this argument further to suggest that historiographic metafiction, though they come from the present time, can as well be read in a similar manner. They also serve as rich evidence for the complexity of how historical epochs get textualized. They enact the complex interactive contexts and texts of the past by indicating the ways of construing the cultural episteme in interactive contexts. Thus the novels function as the embodiments of the historicity of all texts, and they present a sense of the textuality of all histories. They expose the myth of History as a whole, unified text, to be a human desire to see the past as one fixed universal document. As Frederica contemplates in *Babel Tower*, " 'Only connect,' the 'new paradisaal unit' of 'Oneness,' these were myths of desire and pursuit of the Whole"(312).

These novels double on the voices of the past; and this doubling is, as Kellner puts it, "a performative mirror (or double) of the age itself"(1989: 16). The opening lines of Ross King's *Domino* exemplifies this doubling effect: "I shall begin at the beginning. I

was born in the village of upper Buckling, in the country of Shropshire, in the year 1753”(1996: 6). Don’t these lines echo many of the historical narratives, written by the Enlightenment historians, that tend to begin in a similar manner; or 18th century English novels that pretend to mimic historical narratives? “The ultimate unifying center of eighteenth-century historical writing,” as Gossman says in “History and literature, “is the narrator himself rather than the narrative of events”(1978: 22). The narrative voice in *Domino* establishes the context right from the beginning doubling upon 18th century fiction’s historicist pretense, as much as it does on the writing of historians such as Voltaire, and Gibbon. As the narrative unfolds upon this “historical” emplotment with detailed references to the world of 1770s London, historical contextualism begins to manifest itself creating contexts and identities as “constructs” constituted by the “discursive systems of power” to use Greenblatt’s terms. Needless to say, by this process Ross King achieves a performative double of the age. Novels like this harvest the idea that the past cannot be “recaptured without the contaminations of the present” (Zammito 1993: 794)).

Basically, historiographic metafictionists are, as A.S. Byatt says, “tale-tellers”(1996: 6). They create colorful stories of the past in metafictional self-reflexivity and as intertexts. As Linda Hutcheon posits, this “double contextualizability of intertexts forces us not only to look beyond the centers to the margins, the edges, the ex-centric”(1989: 25). This is especially evident in Derek Beaven’s *Newton’s Niece* which presents Newton’s experiments in esoteric sciences investing the 18th century context with multiple contexts and intertexts. Newton’s niece, Kit, appears at first as half-animal who becomes the subject of Newton’s secret experiments in search of the philosopher’s stone. During the testing of what Kit refers to as Newton’s “Elixir,” which is the “ultimate goal of alchemy,” he is transformed into a pretty young girl. Kit narrates the story with an ironic distance from the narrative, representing a characteristic feature of 18th century historical writing. The historical recontextualization operates here at the level of scientific discourse associated with Isaac Newton in history. The novel presents an ironic version of history at this level, since Newton’s “elixir” is “never made public. Of course not. It was never sent up to the Annals of the Royal Society, whose august fellows later conspired to deny for centuries that their sainted Mr Newton even so much as looked at an alembic, let alone suffered from a primary obsession with the warped and solitary art of the Puffers” (1995: 22). Did Newton ever discover the philosopher’s stone? Is there any truth to this version of history? Perhaps the only answer is in acknowledging this version of the past as one of many other contextualizations. Our knowledge of Newton can only be textual. And in this version, Newton both is and is not the historical Newton. As Ricoeur argues, history can be known in the form of a narrative, and narrative accounts of historical events only give a certain version of the specific events of the past. In

Hayden White's words, "stories are not true or false, but rather more or less intelligible, coherent, consistent, persuasive and so on. And this is true of historical, no less than fictional stories"(1986: 492).

There are different historical readings, and the reading of *Newton's Niece*, then, is equally plausible as any other historical reading of Newton's own identity. In this respect, historical contexts presented in historiographic metafiction can pass as intelligible accounts of the past. After all the reality of the past is constituted by multiple contexts and intertexts, be they literary or historical. What is then the meaning of history? It seems the new historicist criticism has found it in the manner of what Novalis brilliantly states in *The Blue Flower*: "If a story begins with finding, it must end with searching"(1996: 112).

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