



Wesleyan University

Border Crossings: History, Fiction, and Dead Certainties

Author(s): Cushing Strout

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *History and Theory*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (May, 1992), pp. 153-162

Published by: Blackwell Publishing for Wesleyan University

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505594>

Accessed: 07/02/2012 19:55

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Blackwell Publishing and Wesleyan University are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *History and Theory*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

BORDER CROSSINGS: HISTORY, FICTION, AND *DEAD CERTAINTIES*

CUSHING STROUT

ABSTRACT

Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties* is assessed in the light of the complex relationship between history and fiction, which share some limited common territory. Examples are cited from Mary Chesnut, Oscar Handlin, Georg Lukács, Herman Melville, Robert Penn Warren, P. D. James, and Wallace Stegner.

Schama's book has some kinship to the skepticism found in "the new historicism" and "deconstruction," but also has its own differences from the fashionable "inverted positivism" which concludes that since evidence is not an open window on reality, it must be a wall precluding access to it. Only two of Schama's three narratives cohere, and while uncertainty may be a common theme, his historian's judgment tends to dissipate much of the mystery his fictionalizing technique creates. His idea of historical uncertainty arises from a fallacy that a "communion with the dead" (as in Henry James's *The Sense of the Past*), possible only for a time-traveler, represents authentic knowledge.

Affirming that asking questions and relating narratives are not mutually exclusive, Schama joins the company of philosophers (Collingwood, Dray, Mink, Ricoeur) and historians (Hexter, John Lukacs, Veyne, and Strout) who have also made this case.

The historian Carlo Ginzburg has recently noted that a shift in historical thinking has brought "the peripheral, blurred area between history and fiction close to the center of contemporary historiographical debate." The widespread contemporary recognition that historical evidence is not "a transparent medium," or "an open window that gives us direct access to reality," is a crucial contribution to historical understanding. But those who have drastically minimized the differences between fiction and history by fictionalizing history have also contributed to the reduction of historiography to arbitrary aesthetic or political preferences. For them histories are as incommensurable as novels, and so they cannot legitimate the actual and fruitful debates among historians. These "narrativists" boast of their liberation from positivistic realism, but as Ginzburg has noted, by turning the idea of evidence into "a wall, which by definition precludes any access to reality," they rely on "a sort of inverted positivism."¹ Moreover, their revolt against realism in fiction has minimized the chance of seeing how it can sometimes enlarge historical understanding.

1. Carlo Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991), 87, 83. Lionel Gossman has also criticized the merger of fiction and history, which he once endorsed, in "The Rationality of History," *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 285–324.

Is Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties* a "new historicism" that "researches the legend of the past while demonstrating the seductive unknowability of the real thing"?² I think it is more idiosyncratic and complicated than that and not at all likely to be a trendsetter in historiography, even though it does have some affinities to "deconstruction" and the "new historicism." Some reviewers have seen it as subversive of the integrity of history as a discipline, while in self-defense, Schama has seen it instead as emulating the historical novelists. The issue is an appropriate occasion for reflecting on the complex relation between fiction and history, a problem for scholars on both sides of the dividing line, which can be crossed either in doubtful or in justifiable ways.

There is a border country where history and literature encounter each other. If taken literally, the traditional Aristotelean division between the historical actual and the literary possible ignores the role of possibility in historical analysis and the role of actuality in the writing of literature. What could happen, what typically happens, what might have happened, and what actually happened, as Raymond Williams has noted, constitute complex overlapping positions on a spectrum that appears in the major forms of epic, romance, drama, and narrative.³ Even so, George Eliot's idea of "the veracious imagination" is quite different from "the voracious imagination." The former seeks to make imagination serve truth by the creation of fictions that would supply deficiencies in the historical evidence by "careful analogical creation."⁴ The latter is so enamored of the creative nature of imagination that it endows it with imperial power to transmute everything into itself so that it reigns in an imaginary kingdom, forever walled off from the incursion of any forces from a surrounding and supposedly unknowable reality. The lion of the imagination lies down with the lamb of fact very easily under this heralded "postmodern" condition: every day the lion is fed a fresh lamb. The fictional becomes so universal in this widespread contemporary mood that it can no longer be contrasted with anything nonfictional, but of course in that case the fictional loses its own meaning, lacking any comparative method of discriminating it.

A historical novelist, Marguerite Yourcenar, has argued that all novels by interpreting past actions and memories "are woven out of the same stuff as History itself."⁵ But some writers create works that include historical places, events, customs, and attitudes. Such writers clearly intend to say something about particular people at a particular time and place, not just about the human heart in general. Their works can enlarge our historical understanding. Yet attributing to real persons adventures they did not have, as Michel Butor has said, may produce charges of slander and lying, for if persons are unique, the writer "cannot give them other names without falsifying the situation which

2. John Bayley, "In Which We Serve," *New York Review of Books* (November 7, 1991), 7.

3. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), 148.

4. George Eliot, "Leaves from a Note-book: Historic Imagination," *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York, 1963), 446-447.

5. Marguerite Yourcenar, "Notebooks on *Memoirs of Hadrian*," *Anchor Review* 2 (1957), 168.

they must, precisely, designate.”⁶ He concludes that the only pertinent witnesses about characters in a novel, even if they have actually existed, are the author’s sentences in the text.

Butor’s point does not take into account Georg Lukács’s defense of the historical novelist who respects the singularity of the actual case by focusing on the general social and cultural milieu, rather than on specific historical events. This kind of historical novelist keeps actual persons in minor roles, relating to unfamiliar episodes in their careers, or to gaps and uncertainties in the documentary record. Such occasions provide an opening for the novelist’s imagination without setting it out on a collision course with the historian’s enterprise. Some novelists have succeeded even when historical figures are not given a minor role in the fiction.

Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* has a fictional version of the legendary Huey Long as a major figure, but he is kept at a certain filtered distance from the reader by being seen only through the eyes of the fictional narrator. Moreover, Warren is faithful to the structure of Long’s career in its outline, and most of his characters have close analogues in the historical record. Above all, Warren’s interest is not documentary but thematic and philosophical, the center of his story being the narrator’s reflections on how past and present focus each other and on the role of the great man in history. There is in his novel what Lukács called “a necessary anachronism” because Willie Stark’s tragic consciousness at the end that it might all have been different, if he had not been assassinated, is not matched by the historical Long’s awareness of his role. But fictional protagonists for literary reasons usually have a sharper consciousness of their outlook and role than actual historical characters usually do, caught up in the pressures of real events. The pattern of action traced in historical novels is often a tragic one and is focused on a continuing individual protagonist in a way that political, social, and cultural histories are not.⁷

How does Schama solve the problem of finding the dividing line on the spectrum of history and fiction? He distinguishes between “works of the imagination” and “scholarship,” yet he also asserts that “the inventive faculty” is at work in all scholarship because it involves “selecting, pruning, editing, commenting, interpreting, delivering judgements” (322). True, these functions are inventive in the sense that they require reflection and judgment, but they are not inventive in the way that fiction is when it makes up characters, events, places, and times. Oddly enough, in his inventory of inventing he does not include telling and evoking, which are the talents that link him most closely to novelists.

6. Michel Butor, “The Novel as Research,” *Inventory: Essays by Michel Butor*, ed. Richard Howard (New York, 1968), 27.

7. See Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, transl. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London, 1962), 167–168. See also Frederick A. Olafson, *The Dialectic of Action: A Philosophical Interpretation of History and the Humanities* (Chicago, 1979), 80–81. I have discussed the historical novel in general and with particular reference to Warren, Ralph Ellison, William Styron, Gore Vidal, and E. L. Doctorow in Cushing Strout, *The Veracious Imagination: Essays on American History, Literature, and Biography* (Middletown, Conn., 1981), 157–179.

Other narrative historians have effectively used literary techniques for these purposes. Carl Becker in "The Spirit of '76" even invented a document and several characters to illustrate in a representative and witty way different colonial political positions about the coming of the American Revolution; and Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* eloquently used novelistic narration and some literary evidence to communicate the anxieties of provincial rural emigrants coming to a more mobile and modern America and generating a new cohort of more Americanized immigrants.⁸ Mary Chesnut, as C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, adapted the diary form, twenty years after the events her book recounts, "to combine historical with figurative and fictional truth and thus to generate the coherence and irony she sought" in illuminating her Southern experience of the Civil War.⁹

Fiction itself can appear in a work without contradicting its historical character, if the author knows what he is up to and the reader can appreciate it. Wallace Stegner, a novelist and historian, has written a memoir about his early life on a Canadian-American frontier line by integrating his personal reminiscences with public documentation to set his story within an historical process of settlement. He has included within *Wolf Willow* a fictional short story to dramatize the unromantic harrowing life of cowboys during a harsh blizzard.¹⁰ In spite of this variety of method the result justifies Stegner's hope that it would be "one thing, not three" and his belief that "its dominant impulse was historical." He wanted to be "the Herodotus of the Cypress Hills," and the reader has no difficulty in seeing the book in that light. He has always tried to keep clear in his own mind when he has functioned primarily as a novelist and when he has written primarily as a historian. For this reason he removed from his memoir one story because of a literary reason: it was a first-person narrative by a Mounted Policeman and intruded "a disturbingly subjective voice" into an already discontinuous book (formally speaking): "Unlike fiction, history can have only one voice, the historian's."¹¹

The question of voice is what is troubling about Schama's book, for it includes the voices of a fictional character, an iconographer, a psychobiographer, a historian, and a historical novelist. The result is cacophony. He refers to his "historical novellas," but, unlike fiction, his book (with only one exception) is about actual persons and events in actual times and places, and it has no continuing protagonists or literary pattern of meaning. The subject matter is historical: the death of General Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham, the genesis and symbolism of Benjamin West's famous painting of that event, the psychology of

8. Carl L. Becker, "The Spirit of '76," *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York, 1935), 47–80; Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston, 1951).

9. C. Vann Woodward, "Mary Chesnut in Search of Her Genre," *The Future of the Past* (New York, 1989), 260.

10. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (New York, 1962).

11. Wallace Stegner, "On the Writing of History," *The Sound of Mountain Water* (Lincoln, Neb., 1985), 209–210.

the historian Francis Parkman, and the grisly circumstances of a historical crime, culminating in the trial of a Harvard professor, John Webster, for the murder of his colleague, George Parkman, the uncle of the historian Parkman. Moreover, Schama has immersed himself in the pertinent documentation. Yet he does enter fictionally into the inner consciousness of one invented character (a soldier) and several historical persons connected with the Harvard murder. The results are problematic for both literary and historical reasons.

To be sure, with respect to his treatment of the Harvard murder one might point to a distinguished precedent in Herman Melville's novellas, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*, in which documentary reports of actual mutinies enter into the stories as such, but where they function as alternate and suspect versions of an elusive truth. Similarly for Schama, the documentary account of the trial is embedded in his larger concerns about the issue of the cultural significance of the case in terms of the Boston Brahmins whose repute is stained by the crime and its relation to uncertainties in the legal attempt to fix the truth about it. That elusiveness connects with the historian's own sense of the limits to historical knowledge.

Schama has a claim about the linkage of his stories, but it covers only part of his book. True, Francis Parkman, the historian, wrote about General Wolfe, whose death was painted by Benjamin West; but neither of these segments historically connects with the murder of Parkman's uncle. It is only accidental that the murdered man should be the historian's uncle. In his afterword Schama goes on to say that the Parkman stories are linked by "compulsions and obsessions that run through the entire tragic dynasty" of the Parkman inheritance, and he speaks of "family obligations" shaping the history of all the protagonists. This is the stuff of a good historical novel, but unfortunately he has to resort to an explanatory afterword because his narratives do not themselves sufficiently elucidate this connecting theme. Schama shows that the historian Parkman can be seen in some ways to have identified himself morally and psychologically with General Wolfe, but Schama himself says that while the historian's father "bears the immediate brunt of the macabre tragedy, his historian son stands remote from the scene, lost in the forest darkness of Pontiac's Indian Conspiracy" (324).

The disjunctions in the stories are underlined by the radical shifts in Schama's narrative techniques. The book begins novelistically "At the Face of the Cliff" with a fictional soldier's stream-of-consciousness. It changes gears to a brilliant account of West's project of painting the death of Wolfe, and this segment is written in the manner of an art historian. The section on Francis Parkman is written in the mode of a psychobiographer who does not use clinical jargon. The bulk of the book is given over, however, to "Death of a Harvard Man," which is written like a historical novel with the narrating author having the power (which no historian has) to enter and identify with the inner consciousness of several historical persons.

Perhaps the place to look for unity is in the title. Schama's theme of the

death of certainty is easily misunderstood because he does not wish to join the fashionable skepticism, rife in literary quarters, that textualizes the world and then makes much of “undecidability” with respect to reading every text. Schama emphasizes that he does not “scorn the boundary between fact and fiction,” even though he deliberately blurs it in his book. In contrast to “post-structuralist deconstructionists,” for whom everything is a text, for him the “lived past” is more than “an artificially designed text” (322). He holds to “a completely conventional view”: the critical historian tests for “plausibility, coherence, apparent closeness or distance from the truth.” This book, however, he said in an interview, is not “about offering the truest possible account,” rather, it involves “offering accounts that range from the most imagined to the most baldly presented evidence.”¹²

Where is the author, then, in relation to this range of accounts? Is he simply agnostic, as a novelist might want to be, about what might be “the truest” account? Or is his skepticism more radical, believing that in principle there can never be a true account? He does present a contrast between the fictional soldier’s gritty account of the General’s death and West’s highly idealized painting of it, but that is only to be expected, since intelligent people do not “read” paintings as if they were literal reports on what happened. There is also the contrast, which he points out in his Afterword, between the commemorated death of Wolfe, designed to perpetuate his name, and the legal version of the Harvard murder, an account using a verdict to bury the embarrassing event in the obscurity of the forgotten past by treating it as over and done with. “And maybe the history wasn’t quite so conveniently closed as all that.”¹³ There was indeed a doubt embedded in the trial about whether the charge should have been manslaughter, as the murderer’s confession asserted, or whether his story was self-servingly shaped to fit his hope for a pardon from the governor. Criminal trials, however, very often deal with such problems of ambiguity about motive without thereby becoming the justification for an announcement of a cosmic uncertainty principle.

Moreover, Schama himself is sometimes uncertain about his uncertainty. He plays up the ambiguities in the forensic evidence about the bones, the murder weapon, and the murderer’s motives, yet Schama himself flatly refers to John Webster having “killed George Parkman” and says that Professor Webster’s petition for clemency on grounds of his lack of premeditation “has, in essence, the ring of truth” (274, 290). So the historian’s judgment has dissipated much of the mystery his fictional technique is designed to create through “self-disrupting narratives.” His interviewer for *Harvard Magazine* thinks that *Dead Certainties* suggests that “it is impossible to put historical events entirely back together once they have been shattered into uncertainties by unreliable witnesses and interested interpreters.”¹⁴ Why should this problem of bias, which all historians, along

12. Glenn Kaye, “A Certain Simon Schama,” *Harvard Magazine* 94 (1991), 50.

13. Quoted in “A Certain Simon Schama,” 50.

14. Kaye, 50.

with policemen, detectives, judges, and juries, commonly face much of their time in sifting documents of various kinds, lead to an irreversible catastrophe, like the fall of Humpty Dumpty? The Salem witchcraft trials, like the trials of Sacco and Vanzetti, Alger Hiss, and the Rosenbergs, have generated much historiographic and political controversy, but historians, whatever their differences, have not seen them as intrinsically unresolvable problems, as ambiguous as Kafka's *The Trial*. The current prestige of radical skepticism seems to have more to do with academic literary fashion and the belief by political radicals in the advantages of asserting it than with the empirical problems of working historians, who are not in general intellectually paralyzed by doubt or driven to write fiction instead.

An illuminating example by contrast is P. D. James's historical study of a famous nineteenth-century London crime even more gothically gruesome than the Harvard murder: the Ratcliffe Highway murders, which in 1811 provoked nationwide panic and revulsion. James is an accomplished writer of classically structured fictional detective stories, and she brings this talent, as well as her professional experience of forensic medicine as a civil servant in the police department, to reconstructing the story of the murders. When she read about them in the Newgate Calendar, it seemed to her that "there was a great deal of doubt about this whole crime."¹⁵ But throughout *The Maul and the Pear Tree* she is scrupulously faithful to the evidence and to rational analysis of it in its social context at a time when the police forces were primitive and inadequate to their task. She not only presents a convincing case for the innocence of the person hanged for the crimes, in part because of ethnic prejudice, but she also persuasively suggests a possible hypothesis about the actual murderer. Where Schama the historian is full of uncertainties and drawn to fictional techniques, James the novelist comes to conclusions and is thoroughly historical in her methods.¹⁶

Perhaps what lies behind this difference is a historian's envy of the novelist's capacity in her fiction to invent the inner consciousness of her characters. In any case, Schama's presupposed notion of what genuine knowledge would be like is taken from a novelist, Henry James, and in particular his unfinished novel, *The Sense of the Past*, about a historian. Schama finds in the story "the habitually insoluble quandary of the historian: how to live in two worlds at once" by restoring the mutilated remains of the past to present life. But Ralph Pendrel's project is actually quite unhistorical and mystical: he wants "communion with the dead" for which no amount of documents, as Henry James says, would ever be enough. Schama himself points out that the hero succeeds "only through a metaphysical mystery, by which in the year 1910, he walks through the front door of the London house left to him in a legacy and enters 1820" (320). Schama's rueful conclusion, however, does not follow: "Without this

15. Rosemary Herbert, "A Mind to Write: An Interview with P. D. James," *The Armchair Detective* 19 (1986), 344.

16. P. D. James and T. A. Critchley, *The Maul and the Pear Tree* (London, 1971).

convenient epiphany, historians are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness, however thorough or revealing their documentation" (328). This antithesis between a mystical communion that is "real" knowledge and a frustrated chasing of shadows, which is the poor historian's lot, is hyperbolic and melodramatic. The historian's resources are poor only when measured by this irrelevant and utopian standard of a metaphysical mystery of time-travel.

The time-traveler, moreover, would find himself in an impossible position. To become one with the people of 1820 he would have to be, like them, without any knowledge of his own world of 1910; but if he somehow magically could divest himself of his 1910 consciousness, he would lose all the historian's advantages of hindsight. He would be on the same footing as the people of 1820, who were themselves often puzzled about what was happening or how to explain it. Communion with them would not clear up whatever puzzled them. The contemporaries of the Harvard murder had no advantage whatever over Schama in figuring out what really happened. Schama would gain nothing in his understanding of the question about whether or not the murder was premeditated if he had Ralph Pendrel's power to walk through the door as a time-traveler. Even if he could become the murderer, he might not know the answer because the murderer may have been confused about the precise state of his own disturbed mind. The *Harvard Guide to American History* made the essential point long ago: "If a time machine were available to carry the historian back through the past at will, he would confront, on stepping off the machine, the very problems of interpretation he thought he had left behind."¹⁷

James himself was understandably perplexed by how to carry out his own idea for a novel. When he took up his idea again in 1914, he recognized that his time-traveler, who became the past person represented in a portrait, would have a "double consciousness" of "being the other and yet himself also, of being himself and yet the other also." It might seem that the time-traveler could profitably combine the immediacy of the past participant's outlook with the retrospective advantages of the present historian. But James imagined instead that his hero would feel "*cut off*" and "*lost*" with "an anguish that it seems to him he can neither betray nor suppress."¹⁸ The anachronistic examples of Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and of E. L. Doctorow's confrontational black militant in the era of *Ragtime*, though mordantly funny, are also bleak in outcome. In these cases the historical incredibility may be taken as part of their mode of black humor, but it also distinguishes them from historical novels in which large-scale anachronism is always a radical flaw.¹⁹ These comic games with history suggest the genre of an antihistorical novel

17. *Harvard Guide to American History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), 15.

18. "The Sense of the Past," *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (Chicago, 1981), 364, 368.

19. See my discussion of both novels in *The Veracious Imagination*, 185–194, and in *Making American Tradition: Visions and Revisions from Ben Franklin to Alice Walker* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1990), chap. 8.

whose purpose is political and whose effect is to breed distrust of both the process of history and the writing of history.

Schama explains that he has “deliberately dislocated the conventions by which histories establish coherence and persuasiveness,” as both Twain and Doctorow did, but the historian says nothing to indicate an embrace of Doctorow’s endorsement of Roland Barthes’s idea that historical discourse is itself “a particular form of fiction.” Fiction is in Doctorow’s view “perhaps a superhistory” with wider and more varied sources than those used by the historian.²⁰ This “superhistory,” however, suggests some sort of referentiality that is not explained by the use of the term “fiction,” nor is it at all clear what sort of constraints, if any, would discipline this new kind of history.

Schama’s shifting voice and “self-disrupting narratives” link him to the “post-structuralist new historicists,” who are seldom found in history departments.²¹ Yet Schama’s general point about history is that “the asking of questions and the relating of narratives” need not be “mutually exclusive forms of historical representation,” and this case has been made by several philosophers and historians who antedate the fashionable academic talk in literary departments about “post-modernism” and the “new historicism.”²² Schama’s last word is that even if “our flickering glimpses of dead worlds fall far short of ghostly immersion, that perhaps is still enough to be going on with” (326).

While questioning and relating can go together, they do not entail or explain Schama’s additional belief in “the rather banal axiom that claims for historical knowledge must always be fatally circumscribed by the character and prejudices of its narrator” (322). He gives no argument for the claim, as Carl Becker and Charles Beard did in developing their own pragmatic form of this skeptical relativism, nor does he tell us how this allegedly fatal circumscription works in his own case.²³ The claim is also a favorite assertion of the “deconstructionists” and some “new historicists,” though whether or not they exempt themselves from their rule is always a pertinent question.²⁴ But the degree and nature of such circumspection is an empirical question, a matter for historians themselves

20. E. L. Doctorow, “False Documents,” in *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner (Princeton, 1983), 24–25.

21. See for example *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York, 1989), in which of twenty-one contributors nineteen teach in departments of literature; one historian is a theorist of history and the other a Marxist who is critical of “new historicism.”

22. Among philosophers, R. G. Collingwood, William Dray, Louis O. Mink, and Paul Ricoeur have written convincingly on this theme. So have historians such as J. H. Hexter, John Lukacs, Paul Veyne, C. Vann Woodward, and myself.

23. See Cushing Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl L. Becker and Charles A. Beard* (New Haven, 1957).

24. Brooks Thomas sees an “unrecognized debt” owed by the “new historicism” to what I called the pragmatic revolt in American history, the historiography of liberal progressives. It is not clear to me how much he accepts my criticisms of that pragmatic relativism, criticism which owes more to Croce, Ortega, and Collingwood than it does to American sources; but Thomas does end his essay paradoxically by calling for the usefulness of a “belief in disinterested inquiry into our past.” See Brooks Thomas, “The New Historicism and Other Old-fashioned Topics,” *The New Historicism*, 197, 201.

to debate in particular cases. Even a self-declared New Left feminist Marxist of Foucaultian sympathies has with refreshing independence argued against the current dogma that everything has a politics, its denial being “no doubt reactionary.” The reasoning is tautological, she points out, “impervious to evidence; the accusers need not do the difficult work of examining how critical orientations interact with specific political initiatives, even in the most immediate arena of academic politics.” She even more unfashionably believes that a “new historicist” might find that her “historical curiosity can develop independently of political concerns” because “the impulses, norms, and standards of a discipline called history,” which has “achieved a high level of autonomy in the late twentieth century, are a profound part of the subjectivity of some scholars and do not in all cases require political ignition.”²⁵

Schama’s theme about the staining of the repute of Boston’s cultural elite by the sordid nature of the Harvard murder might seem like a typical “new historicist” demystification, an account of how power corrupts culture; and his story does end with a dream of a religious vision, analogous to the Second Coming, experienced by the Baptist governor, who could not actually transcend “the gory mess of historical reality,” for he signed the execution warrant. He is presented, nevertheless, as intelligent, responsible, and “genuinely innocent,” not as a mere political symptom of a vicious system. Perhaps something other than the unmasking of politics inspires Schama’s work.

For Schama, fictionalizing is a sort of intellectual holiday. He himself has admitted to “a slight pang” that he invented anything at all in his story because he could imagine “a genuine nonfiction book that would have a lot of immediacy without narrative invention.”²⁶ Alternatively, one could imagine as well a fictional story (perhaps suggested by the Harvard murder) that would serve his considerable literary talents. Meanwhile we have his dazzling, but jarringly jagged hybrid form without knowing what justifies his choice of its peculiarity.

What is missing is some account of why its author found insufficient in substance and technique Helen Thomson’s partly novelized story of the same crime in *The Harvard Murder* (1971), which uses many of the same quotations from the public record. His bare reference to her book in his bibliography tells us nothing about why he wanted to retell the story which she has already told. In a book as idiosyncratic in form as *Dead Certainties*, it would be illuminating to know much more than we do about the genesis of its subject and techniques in the author’s intellectual career.

Ithaca, N.Y.

25. Catherine Gallagher, “Marxism and the New Historicism,” *The New Historicism*, 44, 46.

26. Richard Bernstein, “A Historian Enters Fiction’s Shadowy Domain,” *New York Times* (May 15, 1991), C18.