Literature and the Turn from History

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Four paragraphs into a recent economic history of the world appears the comment, "Jane Austen may have written about the refined conversations over tea served in china cups. But for the majority of the English as late as 1813 conditions were no better than for their naked ancestors of the African savannah. The Darcys were few, the poor plentiful."[1] Even in the midst of a revival that has seen her novels translated to the screen one after another, the hostile view persists: Jane Austen is a monarch of the teacup. Presiding over a miniature world, she shuts out the noise and truth of things—history. Though no reader of *Pride and Prejudice* imagines the Darcys of England are many, it is implied that in order to see the world as it really is we will have to abandon the narrow vision of Jane Austen in favor of the boundless vision of the economist.

While no one would deny that many things are excluded from representation in Jane Austen's pages, the same is true of any work of fiction. Some things are shown, some aren't. Representation per se implies selection, and therefore omission. Only in the eyes of one who interprets omission suspiciously, as an act of dishonesty and concealment, would the showing of some things and not others become a suspect act in and of itself. It was during the French Revolution, with its preoccupation with plots and concealments and its canonization of Rousseau, who in his *Confessions* purported to tell everything, that the rhetoric of suspicion came dramatically to the fore.[2] And the aftermath of the French Revolution is itself among those matters pointedly excluded from the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813.

If the poor do not appear in the Austen field of vision, neither do the Napoleonic Wars, quite as if the author agreed with Wordsworth's judgment that "the great national events which are daily taking place" degrade the imagination of the reading public.[3] With the revaluation in a now politicized profession of M. H. Abrams' finding that Wordsworth turned "from the history of mankind to the mind of the single individual,

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[1]Gregory Clark, *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 2.

[2]On the French Revolution and the rhetoric of suspicion, see Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

[3]See the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Literary Imagination, volume 10, number 1, pp. 25–35
doi:10.1093/litimag/imn003
Advance Access publication February 5, 2008

from the militant external action to the imaginative act,"[4] the turn from history has been depicted as an act of falsification. I want to propose that the turn from history is not specific to the romantic era and, in one form, goes back to the beginnings of Western narrative. But if Jane Austen turned against history, the French Revolution turned against literature. During the Revolution, "struggles and desires were out on the streets, which demanded and produced an emphatic rhetoric of language and gesture . . . ; the call was to the moment, making journalism or declamation or song the significant modes and leaving little time or place for other developments."[5] Direct action eclipsed the sublimations of literature. It may be for this reason that even the partisans of history who accuse others of evading reality cannot point to the great poetry and prose of the French Revolution. Are they prepared to acknowledge, too, that more French soldiers lost their lives in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars than in the slaughter of World War I?[6] Even setting aside the displacement of literature by action, and the threat to the writers of literature posed by the action of the guillotine, the inhuman magnitude of the events let loose by the Revolution does not lend itself to literary representation.

Napoleon's adventures took him as far as Egypt and Russia. In the renowned opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* the word "universally" glances at no such distant place, referring only to the villages of England. Presumably Jane Austen was no great believer in the attempted transformation of humanity by military means. But perhaps too the novel itself, by its history and spirit, was better adapted to the portrayal of civil society and its intricacies than to the campaigns of armies and the clashes of civilizations.[7]

In this matter the exception may in fact prove the rule. We set *War and Peace* in a category by itself among novels not only because of Tolstoy's manifest iconoclasm but because the work really is unparalleled in its survey of historical events on an epic scale. In an earlier novel of war and love Tolstoy edited reality in at least one respect as sharply as Jane Austen. "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* pays no heed to the Spanish Armada; *Pride and Prejudice* happily ignores the Napoleonic Wars"—and so too, writes Cynthia Ozick, does Tolstoy's idyllic *The Cossacks* omit the warriors' predations on Jewish villages.[8] *War and Peace* is less one-sided, despite its undoubted partiality to Russia. Indeed, far from casting his nation's struggle against Napoleon as a war of Orthodoxy against Atheism, Tolstoy views the collision of civilizations largely ironically. Consider this synopsis of the crimes committed by both sides in 1812:

> On the 12th of June 1812 the forces of Western Europe crossed the Russian frontier and war began, that is, an event took place opposed to human reason and to human nature. Millions of men perpetrated against each other such innumerable crimes . . . as in whole centuries are not recorded in the annals of all the law courts of the world, but which those who committed them did not at the time regard as being crimes . . . . To us it is incomprehensible that

[4]M. H. Abrams, "English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age," in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 59.

[5]Stephen Heath, *Gustave Flaubert: Madame Bovary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11.

[6]My source is the historian Linda Frey.

[7]The work that stands as the literary emblem of our nation's costliest war—*The Red Badge of Courage*—was written by one who never set foot on a battlefield. Historians discuss the Civil War but where is the literature *of* the Civil War?

[8]Cynthia Ozick, *The Din in the Head* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 41.

> millions of Christian men killed and tortured each other either because Napoleon was ambitious or Alexander was firm, or because England's policy was astute or the Duke of Oldenburg wronged. We cannot actually grasp what connexion such circumstances have with the actual fact of slaughter and violence: why because the Duke was wronged, thousands of men from the other side of Europe killed and ruined the people of Smolensk and Moscow and were killed by them.[9]

Thus Tolstoy on the clash of civilizations.

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Whether or not we are now engaged in a clash of civilizations, such a conflict did take place over the later Middle Ages in the shape of the Crusades and the war of words that accompanied them. A superb history of the First Crusade records the sack of Jerusalem on July 15, 1099 as "one of the most extraordinary and horrifying events of the medieval age . . . . [The event] left the Holy City awash with blood, its streets littered with mutilated corpses, the air heavy with the putrid stench of death."[10] Not many years after the capture of Jerusalem, oriental tales entered Latin via the *Disciplina Clericalis* of Petrus Alfonsi (a Spanish Jew conversant with Arabic culture who converted to Christianity) and proceeded to capture the imagination of Europe. How a work this slender, this derivative, and this modest in its scope and ambitions could have left the mark it did is among the wonders of literary history. The brilliance and sheer novelty of the collection's fables have much to do with it, though so does the author's indifference to the clash of religions. A reader who didn't already know that the *Disciplina Clericalis* was composed in the dawn of the Crusades would certainly never guess as much from the text itself. The author of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, though he took the name of Alfonso VI, the conqueror of Toledo, does not write of knights and conquests. The epic conflict of civilizations is excluded from the pages of the *Disciplina Clericalis* as sharply as Jane Austen excludes the Napoleonic Wars, with the result, as in her novels, of a gain in concentration, levity, and wit.

Not that Petrus Alfonsi had no interest in contested questions. Amid the relentless attacks on his own former co-religionists in his *Dialogue Against the Jews*, he included a polemic against the fallacies of the Muslim faith. When he took up his literary pen in the *Disciplina Clericalis*, however, he put aside all such belligerence. Drawn from the stores of the very religions he assailed, the fables of the *Disciplina Clericalis*—among them the famous story (famous in part because of Petrus Alfonsi) of the crone who persuades a chaste wife that unless she yields to a suitor she too will become a weeping puppy—tell of small tests of wit and loyalty, not events of historical magnitude. Their titles refer us to true and false friends, drinkers, linens, swords, wells, chests, barrels, villagers, fords, thieves: a prosaic world far from the sound and fury of clashing civilizations. In excluding religious warfare and the propaganda that goes with it from his collection of loosely instructive fables, Petrus Alfonsi helped set the course of prose fiction in the West.

[9]Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, tr. Louise and Aylmer Maude (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 645.

[10]Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 316, 320.

If the *Decameron* marks the inauguration of modern prose fiction, Boccaccio himself drew on the *Disciplina Clericalis*, and in the spirit of that collection indebted to Jewish, Arabic, Indian and other sources, and espousing moral precepts belonging to no religion exclusively, he portrays non-Christians with a distinct lack of animus. Boccaccio too turned from history in the *Decameron*. Recall that once the devastation of Florence at the hands of the plague in 1348 is documented in the Introduction, that overwhelming reality is barred from the *Decameron*. The turn from events of a magnitude that challenges representation to prosaic adventures and local exploits—this shift is written into Boccaccio's "epic" all but explicitly. As the king of the tenth day reminds the company after the last tale of the *Decameron*, "Tomorrow . . . a fortnight will have elapsed since the day we departed from Florence to provide for our relaxation, preserve our health and our lives, and escape from the sadness, the suffering and the anguish continuously to be found in our city since this plague first descended on it."[11] It would be pedantic to label such a clear-eyed understanding as false consciousness. Edmund Burke, mighty opposite of those who deplore the Romantics' private turn as exactly that, famously stated that "to be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in our society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections." The ten young nobles constitute a platoon in their own right, or what Boccaccio refers to as a brigade.

Not only in turning its back on the plague does the *Decameron* show a preference for small events over great ones. Among the genuinely world-historical events of the Middle Ages were the Crusades, a series of ventures extending over some three hundred years that contributed to the making of "Christendom." Boccaccio's attitude toward those famous enterprises reveals itself in a tale of the first day of the *Decameron*, telling of a king of France who, while a certain Marquis is away on a Crusade to the Holy Land, pays court to the man's wife (1.5). The King is less interested in the conquest of Jerusalem than in the conquest of the Marchioness. The shortest tale of the *Decameron*, also told on the first day (1.9), tells of a reproach received at the hands of a nameless gentlewoman by the disgracefully inept king of Cyprus "after the conquest of the Holy Land by Godfrey of Bouillon," one of the Nine Worthies. About the glory of conquest and the fate of Jerusalem the tale has nothing to say. While no one is going to confuse Boccaccio's relaxed morality with Jane Austen's decorum, he too finds his material well behind the front lines of world history.

Although the Physician of the *Canterbury Tales* made money on the plague, for the other pilgrims the plague seems not to have happened. It is as if they somehow escaped the deadly contagion without actually fleeing it like Boccaccio's brigade, inasmuch as they set out to thank St. Thomas for helping them "whan that they were seeke," and they cannot have recovered from the plague. In any case their pilgrimage is a merely local one—to Canterbury, not to the shrine of St. James in Spain, much less Jerusalem. The last speaker in the *Canterbury Tales*, the admirable Parson, turns the pilgrims' attention to another Jerusalem altogether: "Jerusalem celestial." Although crusaders who died in battle were promised the remission of sins, and although he himself appears to regard Islam as a religion of idolatry (its idol or "mawmet" being Muhammad himself), nevertheless the Parson does not exhort his audience to clear its sins by joining a Crusade. He tells them to

[11] *The Decameron*, tr. G. H. McWilliam (London: Penguin, 1995), 795.

search their souls, for in order to reach the heavenly Jerusalem they will have to follow the prosaic, well-trodden path of Contrition, Confession, and Penance. There are no short cuts. In that the first pilgrim introduced in the *Canterbury Tales*, and the first to speak, the Knight, has fought at Alexandria, while the last to speak deplores war[12] and urges his listeners to look deep into themselves, a certain private turn is enacted in the very course of the *Tales*.

Interestingly, Shakespeare disregarded the Crusades despite setting the earliest of his histories squarely in their era. The nominal hero of *King John*, younger brother of the legendary Richard the Lionhearted, assumed the throne a dozen years after the event that inspired the Third Crusade—the conquest of Jerusalem by Saladin. However glorious the exploits of "Cordelion" may be in the eyes of romance and propaganda, *King John* ignores them, the deceased hero living on in the play not as the legendary foe of Saladin but as the father of Philip the Bastard and the absent source of his astonishing vitality. To judge from his pen, Shakespeare found less to interest him in Richard than in his inglorious brother and illegitimate scion. Given that Shakespeare wrote nine or ten histories including *King John* itself, it can hardly be said that he turned his back on the history. Scanning the Shakespeare canon, though, we can't fail to notice that the history plays tend to be early and the romances late. In his own manner Shakespeare too took a private turn, from the bloody saga of civil war to such family-centered fantasies as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

Shakespeare's histories and romances both encompass in their cast of characters a wide social range, employ episodic construction, and span years, but in the romances the very passage of time seems to have an enriching effect. Tempest imagery in *3 Henry VI* illustrates the forces loosed in civil war and the curse on a nation caught in those forces. The tempest in *The Tempest* is an illusion. So too, instead of the derisory marriage of England and France in the persons of Henry V and Katherine (and then of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou, followed by a proposition to Bona of France by a precontracted Edward IV, history repeating itself as charade), we have the union of Ferdinand and Miranda, and the city-states they represent. In some ways, indeed, the Shakespearean romances read like histories transfigured or reversed. The obsession with ancestry that drives the Wars of the Roses, with Lancastrians looking back to Henry V and Yorkists to their own genealogical tables, yields to an idealization of history's newcomers—children not heavily burdened with the weight of the past, children who are themselves a brave new world, like the gallant Mamillius of *The Winter's Tale* who "makes old hearts fresh" (1.1.33–4). In the first tetralogy, Henry VI seems to be the cipher that the circumstance of being a child-king made him—a blank, ineffectual, present but unregarded. In the romances noble natures prevail over their circumstances (Marina, for example, maintaining her purity in a brothel, and sparks of nobility flashing in the sons of Cymbeline in the wilds of Wales).[13]

Regardless of the New Historicism, Shakespeare's plays don't seem to be all that rooted in the contemporary. The histories are set in the past, for the most part well in the past. And what reader of Shakespeare, not knowing the course of English history,

[12]Parson's Tale, l. 563.

[13]See Stewart Justman, *Shakespeare: The Drama of Generations* (Delhi, India: Macmillan, 2007).

would imagine that within one generation of the poet's death the nation would descend into civil war? Not a war of dynastic succession like the Wars of the Roses either, but of a kind unimagined in the plays; a war fueled, moreover, by a Puritan movement Shakespeare noticed only to ridicule.[14] Among the vast differences between Shakespeare and the Puritan Milton is that where Shakespeare staged the killing of kings, Milton explicitly defended regicide.[15] So too does Milton's poetic commemoration of a lost cause, *Paradise Lost*, emerge from the fires of recent history in a way unlike anything of Shakespeare's. Not that Milton as poet wrote with the same polemical intention as the advocate of the English revolution. Northrop Frye saw in Milton "a revolutionary who became disillusioned with the failure of the English people to achieve a free commonwealth, and was finally compelled to find the true revolution within the individual"[16]—forerunner of those romantics who in their disenchantment with the French Revolution took a similar turn.

If *Paradise Lost* is a revolution made art, one of its innovations is to raise to high seriousness the matter of marital discord, which in the eyes of the tradition running from antiquity through the Renaissance (the eyes of Boccaccio, for example) would more likely have appeared comical. "Thus they in mutual accusation spent/The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning,/And of their vain contest appeared no end," Book Nine concludes. Never before had marital politics been thus anatomized. If, as Bakhtin believes, epic and novel belong to different worlds,[17] the definitive epic in our language nevertheless looks toward the domesticity of the novel as that form "rose" in England a few decades later. That the English novel grew up not in the midst of civil war but after the storm had cleared suggests something of its affinity for civil society.

One reason the novel flourished in England may have to do with the comparative stability of English institutions. If the novel deals in the smaller dramas of love and money, the English system, with its security of property and well-established freedom of contract in matters of love, provided a favorable soil. Detailing the advance of "the civilizing process" under conditions like these, Norbert Elias in *Power and Civility* emphasizes "the longer and more complex chains in which each act is now automatically enmeshed." Novels specialize in long chains of events. Elias's account of socially enmeshed persons carefully monitoring each other and themselves is borne out on any given page of Jane Austen (just as his study of "the civilizing process" brings out exactly what is being valued at zero in contemptuous references to the "refined conversations over tea" said to characterize *Pride and Prejudice*). Elias's finding that in the course of the civilizing process "the battlefield" moves within the self suggests both that Austen had

[14]A doctrine that "gave men courage to fight tenaciously, if necessary alone," Puritanism "supplied a superb fighting morale. It appealed to men with social consciences, to those who felt that the times were out of joint (as they were), and that they could and therefore must help to set them right." Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution: 1603-1714* (New York: Norton, 1980), 69.

[15]On Milton vs. Shakespeare, see George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 31.

[16]Northrop Frye, *The Return of Eden*: *Five Essays on Milton's Epics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 112.

[17]M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

grounds for shutting out the gunfire of history, and that the private turn is not limited to romantics.[18] In any event, amid the din of clashing civilizations the absence of din in the pages of Jane Austen has real attractions. My former chairman, an island fighter in Pacific in World War II, had Jane Austen in his pack as he landed on Guam.[19] Trollope is said to have been popular during World War II for the good reason that his novels similarly offered "an oasis of reasonableness and normality, a place one could crawl into for a few moments' respite from the sights, sounds, and smells of the twentieth century"[20]—the illusion of a civilization intact.

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Power and Civility is dedicated to the memory of the author's father and mother, the latter of whom died in Auschwitz, although it is not known with certainty when. The civilizing process itself as Elias sees it, with its exclusion of violence as well as constraints on passion, appears to crest in the nineteenth century. By common opinion, the golden age of the novel, too, was not the unprecedentedly savage twentieth century but the nineteenth, corresponding roughly with the Pax Britannica that prevailed from the defeat of Napoleon to the First World War. It was Tolstoy and Dostoevsky's innovation to transplant or dislocate the novel to a society lacking Britain's settled legal and civic institutions, with the result that the world in their works is no longer so much of a given. It is also suggestive that the novel esteemed by many as supreme of its kind in the twentieth century happens to be set during the waning hours of the Pax Britannica even though published after the war that ended it once and for all. It is as if a shattered era were granted an imaginary grace period in *Ulysses*.

"History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," says Stephen Dedalus.[21] In the tradition of Boccaccio's brigade telling tales of infidelity while the plague destroys

[18]Norbert Elias, *Power and Civility*, tr. Edmund Jephcott; Vol. II of *The Civilizing Process* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 241–42. "In the making of the English code features of aristocratic descent fused with those of middle-class descent—understandably, for in the development of English society one can observe a continuous assimilating process in the course of which upper-class models (especially a code of good manners) were adopted in a modified form by middle-class people, while middle-class features (as for instance elements of a code of morals) were adopted by upper-class people" (309). The marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet crystallizes this assimilation, with the twist that Darcy learns manners from the middle-class Elizabeth. On narrative and interiority see Erich Kahler, *The Inward Turn of Narrative*, tr. Richard and Clara Winston (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971).

[19]As he prepared for the landing on Guam, he wrote, "Tomorrow is the day! There are so many things I want to say, and I can't think of a thing. This one, I fear, will be full sized and I should have plenty of time for thought amidst bursting shells. In my pack are: a book of poetry, a Galsworthy novel, one of Jane Austen's, and Conrad's *Lord Jim*." Merrel Clubb, *A Life Disturbed: My Pacific War Revisited* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2005), 110.

[20]Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 162. On Trollope and Austen, see my *Springs of Liberty: The Satiric Tradition and Freedom of Speech* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

[21]James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 34. "Very soon I turned away from politics and concentrated on literature." Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, *Memory* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 265.

their city, Joyce himself ignored the nightmare of history to the extent of sitting out the Great War in Zurich, writing a novel famed for all-inclusiveness, set in the year 1904. "In Switzerland Joyce stayed out of politics and said little about the war, feeling perhaps with Yeats, 'I think it better that in times like these / A poet keep his mouth shut.' "[22] And Joyce modeled his novel both in parody and homage after an original that itself said little about a great war—the Trojan War.

In passing from the world-shaking conflict of the *Iliad* to the romance of one man's return to his home and hearth, Homer established the private turn as a literary pattern. Significantly, the scar Odysseus bears in the *Odyssey* is the one he acquired in a boar's den as a child, not the one acquired in battle on the plains of Troy. So too, the sack of Troy casts scarcely a shadow over events in the *Odyssey* even though the hero took a principal part in it. The second line of the poem, speaking of Odysseus's journeys "after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadels," puts the destruction of that city behind the *Odyssey* even as it momentarily conjures up the image of a violence that stops at nothing. The closest thing to a sustained description of the plunder of Troy in the *Odyssey* does not actually name the city and in fact is used to describe Odysseus himself as he listens to the blind bard Demodocus singing of his (Odysseus's) exploits in Troy:

> So the famous singer sang his tale, but Odysseus
> melted, and from under his eyes the tears ran down, drenching
> his cheeks. As a woman weeps, lying over the body
> of her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city and people
> as he tried to beat off the pitiless day from city and children;
> she sees him dying and gasping for breath, and winding her body
> about him she cries high and shrill, while the men behind her,
> hitting her with their spear butts on the back and the shoulders,
> force her up and lead her away into slavery, to have
> hard work and sorrow, and her cheeks are wracked with pitiful weeping.
> Such were the pitiful tears Odysseus shed . . . (8.521–31)[23]

The suffering of the nameless woman is somewhat de-realized by being used to illustrate the pangs of a man who himself sacked a city.

When Odysseus begins his own narration to the Phaeacean court, he passes in silence over the rape of Troy, and after recording to his own credit the slaughter of the Cicones, sails out onto the open sea of the fantastic where he encounters the Lotus-Eaters, the monstrous Cyclops, and the other exotics renowned to this day. Some theorize that Homer made Odysseus the narrator of his own improbable adventures in order to keep some distance between himself and pure fiction. But even if Odysseus's adventures were not so improbable, it could still be said that his story departs from history precisely in being his story. The "historical" epic of the *Iliad* chronicles events with no one person,

[22]Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 398. Returning to Trieste after the war, Joyce was asked by an acquaintance how he spent the war years. "Joyce replied with utter nonchalance, 'Oh yes, I was told that there was a war going on in Europe' " (472).

[23]*The Odyssey*, tr. Richmond Lattimore (New York: HarperCollins, 1967).

not even the nominal hero Achilles, at the center. The Trojan War is simply too vast and catastrophic, subject to too many divine wills and cosmic ironies, for any person to predominate, just as the epic's title bears the name of no person. Odysseus himself is but one notable among many in the *Iliad*, salient but not central, perhaps the same person as the man of many turns known to us in the *Odyssey*, but by no means at the heart of the story. An epic, says Aristotle, "contains a multiplicity of stories."[24] The *Odyssey* too contains many stories, but because they are attached so largely to a single hero, the poem takes on a more romantic cast than the "history" of a war that transcends him, a war that proved disastrous even for the victors. Of those like Odysseus who fought in the Trojan War, perhaps not many escaped being crushed by the wheels of history. In excluding from *Ulysses* the cataclysm that was taking place while he composed it, Joyce reminds us of Homer's own turn from an epic of clashing civilizations—an epic so death-haunted that before it has fairly begun, corpses are already burning everywhere in the Greek camp (1.52)—to one that tells of a single life.

Just as all kinds of stories and legends gathered around Odysseus rather than the named hero of the *Iliad*, Achilles, so does Odysseus in the wealth of his ambiguities stand as the archetypal literary character. For all the astonishing qualities of the *Iliad*, it was the *Odyssey* that marked the way of literature. Even the *Aeneid*, tracing the lineage of Rome to the fall of Troy, has a central figure in the tradition of the *Odyssey*, a figure whose adventures at sea remind us of the story of Odysseus. But for the most part, the literature of the West has left the founding and conflict and destruction of civilizations to one side in favor of lesser fare. Our literature concerns persons, and even if those who fall in battle in the *Iliad* are given names by Homer, the fact remains that events on the scale of war dwarf the person into insignificance and threaten him with oblivion. The *Iliad* begins with plague. The *Decameron* turns its back on a plague said to have taken 100,000 lives in the city of Florence alone, to follow the adventures and misadventures of persons who at least have names and stories and have not been buried in mass graves. Stalin reportedly said that one death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic.[25] While this is a mass murderer's maxim (and Stalin succeeded in blurring the truth to the extent that no one can say to the nearest million how many he killed), it is true that we cannot really take in events of inhuman magnitude. As Dr Johnson observes in a Rambler paper on biography, "Histories of the downfall of kingdoms, and revolutions of empires, are read with great tranquility."[26] Each of Shakespeare's tragedies bears the name of one or two persons.

There is ancient literary precedent for exclusion. The *Iliad* ends with the destruction of Troy impending, now that the city has lost its great defender Hector; the sack of the city—the violation of its temples, the enslavement of its women—is not shown. Perhaps we can place in this tradition of not-showing the blinding of Oedipus, the killing of Cordelia, Samson's destruction of the stadium and himself in Milton's tragedy (not intended for the stage). The *Odyssey* ends more conclusively than the *Iliad*. But it could be said of any work of fiction shaped by "the sense of an ending" that it departs from history, simply in that history really is one damned thing after another whereas the shaped work

[24]Aristotle, *Poetics*, tr. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 30.

[25]See Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (New York: Vintage, 2002).

[26]Rambler No. 60.

of fiction not only ceases but in some manner resolves. Jane Austen's canons of exclusion constitute merely one mode of fiction's confrontation with "the bleak matter-of-factness of things."[27]

Like the *Odyssey*, many a novel is named after a person, as if the form were remembering its origins (much as the interiority of the novel recalls the inwardness of Odysseus, unique among the Homeric heroes).[28] A novel might be likened to a fictional biography, and in his paper on biography Dr. Johnson prefers those that "display the minute details of daily life" over those that "never descend below the consultation of senates, the motions of armies, and the schemes of conspirators." It is in this spirit of the private turn that Jane Austen omits what Johnson calls "public occurrences" from her novels. In *Ulysses* the details of a day are rendered with a minuteness without precedent. The novel continues to this hour to record the sort of events lost in the glare of history, reminding us of everything sacrificed in the reduction of persons to abstractions and members of statistical categories.

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Joyce once composed a satiric ditty about a certain anti-political Mr. Dooley, which included the lines,

> Who is the tranquil gentleman who won't salute the State
> Or serve Nebuchadnezzar or proletariat
> But thinks that every son of man has quite enough to do
> To paddle down the stream of life his personal canoe?[29]

But sometimes one's little bark hits rough water. Remarkable in its intimation of catastrophic public occurrences by means of the sensitive depiction of private life itself is Ha Jin's recent novel, *Waiting*. Set in China in the years following the Cultural Revolution and its lethal mayhem (which goes unmentioned, however), *Waiting* tells of an army doctor's unconsummated love for a woman not his wife, and the ironies that ensue when, after many years, he is finally able to obtain a divorce and marry her. In other words, *Waiting* is a love story. But the doctor belongs to the People's Liberation Army after all, and from time to time small, seemingly incidental references to political forces creep in, reminders of the great wasting storm of events that our characters have somehow managed to ride out. "Then he saw a yellowish stain on his white sheet. There was no time to wash it off because he had to leave for the morning exercises immediately, so he covered the spot with the current issue of the pictorial *The People's Liberation Army*." Or: "Lin found out that the commissar had divorced his wife not because of any marital problem but because she had written a booklet criticizing some member of the Political Bureau in Beijing and had been turned into a counter-revolutionary. Now she was being

[27]Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 128.

[28]And much as the comparative prominence of women in the novel recalls their rich presence in the *Odyssey*.

[29]"Dooleysprudence," in Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 425.

reformed on a remote farm in Tsitsihar." Or: "Lin was ordered to go to Shenyang to attend a program designed for officers, studying Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value*."[30] It is as if an earthquake were being measured at a distance. A novel may register the larger forces of history, provided that private life is portrayed in a way that picks up more remote vibrations, as in this case. Precisely by keeping the overwhelming forces to which our characters are subject well in the background, *Waiting* evokes something of their power. But by the same token, this is a work that could never have been published during the Cultural Revolution itself.

[30]Ha Jin, *Waiting* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 74, 151, 169.