

Writing the Middle Ages:
the boundaries of historical fiction

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The boundaries of the term ‘historical fiction’ are now so wide
that it’s almost meaningless [...]

Hilary Mantel

I’m telling you stories. Trust me.

Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*

Abstract

This PhD thesis consists of two parts: my novel, *Flight*, and a critical commentary on the process of writing it and its context within the wider genre of historical fiction.

The novel is notionally set in eleventh-century England, at Malmesbury Abbey in Wiltshire. It is inspired by and loosely based upon the lives of two historical figures about whom little is known. The first is the monk, scholar and astronomer Eilmer, whose attempt at human flight sometime shortly after the year 1000 makes him one of the earliest known pioneers of aviation in world history. The other is Ealdgyth, a widowed noblewoman who in 1015 was incarcerated for a short while at Malmesbury on royal orders after her husband, an enemy of the crown, was murdered and his property was seized by King Æthelred II. The novel imagines a series of meetings between these two individuals that in real life perhaps never occurred, and a friendship that might never have flourished. It explores the tensions between faith and scepticism through the deployment of various fantastic elements, including but by no means limited to: dream-visions; auditory and visual apparitions; the appearance of unidentified plant and animal species; extreme weather events; and a seemingly miraculous act of healing.

The critical commentary explores the issues that arise from writing fiction set in the past. Using a practice-based approach that makes particular reference to *Flight* and the processes involved in its composition, I ask: what is historical fiction in the twenty-first century, what is it for, and what is its future? I show that a text's 'historicalness' cannot be more than partial, regardless of what its author might wish or intend, and suggest that the notion of historical-ethical responsibility – to which many contemporary historical novelists subscribe – unnecessarily constrains the horizons of fiction set in the past and its ability to contribute towards discussion of that past. I argue for a new way of thinking about historical

fiction that: (a) reaffirms its own legitimacy, independent of the discipline of history; and (b) recognises the value of a much broader range of strategies by which the past is rendered. Finally, I examine my own novel's use of fantastic elements, demonstrating how fantastic-historical narratives, by simultaneously defamiliarising the past and also making it more relatable, are particularly well suited to speaking to our present concerns and to offering new perspectives on what the past means to us in the twenty-first century.

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All photographs are by the author.



1. Stained glass window depicting the monk Eilmer with a model of his flying apparatus, from Malmesbury Abbey, Wiltshire (1928).

Flight

This section of the thesis has been redacted.

*A sample of the creative work is appended to
the critical analysis that follows.*

Writing the Middle Ages:
the boundaries of historical fiction



2. Malmesbury Abbey, Wiltshire (viewed from the south). The present building is of twelfth-century and later construction. Nothing of the monastery that Eilmer and Ealdgyth would have known remains standing today.

Introduction

We are, it has been suggested, ‘living in a golden age of historical fiction’.¹ Novels set in the past have won the Booker Prize no fewer than six times in the past decade (2011–20) and ten times in total since 2000, when Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* took the honours.² In 2009, a new award specifically for historical fiction, the Walter Scott Prize, was instituted. Worth £25,000, it is one of the largest literary prizes in the United Kingdom, a mark of the value the genre has attained in the wider literary culture. The winner of the 2018 Prize, Benjamin Myers, even received the unusual secondary accolade of a special Royal Mail postmark congratulating him on his victory.³ The past exerts a powerful influence upon the contemporary literary imagination, as many critics have observed. One of those critics, Robert Eaglestone, argues that ‘the resurgent past’ is ‘a distinctive and dominant theme of much contemporary fiction’.⁴ Another, Peter Boxall, identifies the emergence of a new and distinctive kind of ‘historical consciousness’ in the

¹ Carole Angier and Sally Cline, ‘Preface’, in *Writing Historical Fiction: A Writers’ and Artists’ Companion*, ed. Celia Brayfield and Duncan Sprott (Basingstoke: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), xv; Megan O’Grady, ‘Why Are We Living in a Golden Age of Historical Fiction?’, *The New York Times*, 7 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/t-magazine/historical-fiction-books.html>.

² These numbers include the 2018 winner, Anna Burns’s *Milkman*, the setting of which is left ambiguous, although it is widely interpreted as being set in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

³ Natasha Onwuemezi, ‘Bluemoose’s Myers Wins £25k Walter Scott Prize’, *The Bookseller*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/bluemooses-myers-wins-25k-walter-scott-prize-814481>.

⁴ Robert Eaglestone, ‘The Past’, in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, ed. Daniel O’Gorman and Robert Eaglestone (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 311.

literature of the twenty-first century.⁵ Celia Brayfield and Duncan Sprott, in their practical guide *Writing Historical Fiction*, even go as far as to suggest that '[t]he past is the natural habitat of fiction'.⁶ Historical fiction is not only the focus of critical attention; it is also thriving commercially. While it is difficult to come by sales figures for the genre as a whole, one measure of its recent growth is that many larger bookshops now have dedicated sections for historical fiction. When the final instalment in Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell trilogy, *The Mirror and the Light*, was published in the UK in March 2020, it sold 95,000 print copies in its first three days alone.⁷ The past, clearly, is big business.

What exactly is historical fiction in the twenty-first century? What does it mean to write it, and what is it for? How is it constructed, and to what purpose? Over the course of this critical commentary I examine the term and its uses, challenge some of the established orthodoxies regarding the function and the potential of fiction set in the past, and ask where it might go. Throughout, I adopt a practice-based perspective, which is to say I situate my arguments within the context of my own novel, *Flight*, and the creative philosophies and processes involved in its composition. A fantastic-historical novel notionally set in early eleventh-century England, *Flight* is inspired by and loosely based upon the lives of two historical figures about whom little is known. The first of these is the monk, scholar and astronomer Eilmer, who, according to the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury (our only near-contemporary source), constructed a set of artificial wings that he attached to his person and used in an attempt to fly, succeeding in

⁵ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 41.

⁶ Celia Brayfield and Duncan Sprott, eds., *Writing Historical Fiction: A Writers' and Artists' Companion* (Basingstoke: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), xvii.

⁷ Luke Fisher, 'The Mirror and the Light Shines with Huge First-Week Sales', *The Guardian*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/10/the-mirror-and-the-light-shines-with-huge-first-week-sales>.

traversing over 200 yards before crash-landing.⁸ This remarkable feat is generally thought to have taken place sometime between the years 1000 and 1010.⁹ The second figure is Ealdgyth, a widowed noblewoman who in 1015, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (a contemporary source), was incarcerated for a short while at Malmesbury on royal orders after her husband Siferth, an enemy of the crown, was murdered by Ealdorman Eadric and his property seized by King Æthelred II. After a few weeks or months, she was abducted from Malmesbury by the king's rebellious son and heir, Edmund, who 'took the woman [...] and had her for wife'.¹⁰ Even though she is not identified explicitly by name in the novel, for the sake of convenience I refer to her throughout this commentary as Ealdgyth. The novel imagines a series of meetings between these two individuals that in real life we cannot be sure ever occurred, and a friendship that might never have flourished. The primary source extracts detailing both of these episodes are reproduced and discussed in the Appendix.

The aims of this commentary are threefold: (a) to make an intervention in the theorising of historical fiction; (b) to explore my own creative philosophy as regards writing fiction set in the past; and (c) to highlight the benefits of practice-based literary studies. Writers and critics view literature from different angles, and conceive of it in profoundly different terms. As Jeri Kroll and Dominique Hecq have both observed, writers not only read differently from other scholars, but we

⁸ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors, Michael Winterbottom, and R.M. Thomson, vol. 1, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 413–15.

⁹ Lynn White, 'Eilmer of Malmesbury, an Eleventh Century Aviator: A Case Study of Technological Innovation, Its Context and Tradition', *Technology and Culture* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1961): 99; James Paz, 'Human Flight in Early Medieval England: Reality, Reliability and Mythmaking (or Science and Fiction)', *New Medieval Literatures* 15 (2013): 4; R.M. Thomson, 'Eilmer (b. c. 985, d. after 1066), Pioneer of Man-Powered Flight', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 23 September 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20716>.

¹⁰ ASC E *s.a.* 1015: Michael Swanton, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, trans. Michael Swanton (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 145–6.

research differently too.¹¹ Although I occasionally borrow terminologies and concepts from literary scholars where I find them useful and appropriate, I do so as an artist rather than as a critic. My concern is with the practice of writing as much as with the theory, with process as much as end product, and with modes of creative expression as much as modes of interpretation. In this way I intend to stake a claim for the validity of creative writing studies – a relatively young discipline that sits adjacent to, but is nevertheless distinct from, other branches of English studies – as an alternative and productive means of engaging with texts.¹²

I begin in the first chapter by examining some of the approaches and philosophies by which fiction set in the past is constructed and the processes by which it operates. Building upon the framework of ‘modes’ of pastness devised by Robert Eaglestone, I show how, in rendering the past, novelists – myself included – switch between multiple and sometimes even contradictory approaches, the combination of which inflects and complicates the historical content of the work. I argue that the term ‘historical fiction’ no longer holds much meaning except as a broad and convenient shorthand to refer to ‘fiction set in the past’, and suggest that the historical novel is best conceptualised as a discursive space in which discussions regarding the meaning of the past are able to take place.

Having discussed the various processes, approaches and philosophies involved in writing historical fiction in the twenty-first century, in the second chapter I proceed to explore the question of its function: what is historical fiction *for*? Why do we write stories about the past? What are the objectives, commitments and responsibilities of fiction set in the past? The notion that historical novelists have a duty towards the faithful representation of the past is widespread and

¹¹ Jeri Kroll, ‘The Creative Writing Laboratory and Its Pedagogy’, in *Research Methods in Creative Writing*, ed. Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 108; Dominique Hecq, ‘Creative Writing and Theory: Theory without Credentials’, in *Research Methods in Creative Writing*, ed. Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 175.

¹² Tim Mayers, ‘One Simple Word: From Creative Writing to Creative Writing Studies’, *College English* 71, no. 3 (January 2009): 218–19.

longstanding. But is this sense of duty justified, and is it sustainable? How does fiction set in the past establish its legitimacy, if not by reference to historical sources? These questions are especially pertinent in the case of a novel such as *Flight*, which has one foot in history and one foot outside of it, and does not subscribe to the same sort of historical-ethical imperative as, for example, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*.

This positioning of *Flight* on the boundary of what is conventionally thought of as historical fiction is, I suggest, what permits not only its subtle divergence from real-life events and chronology as the narrative progresses, but also the introduction of fantastic elements – phenomena that either appear to be supernatural in nature or else border on the supernatural. In the third and final chapter I turn my attention to these elements and their function within my novel, firstly in relation to the narrative, and then in relation to its historical content. How are these elements used to destabilise our perception of the past and generate alternative kinds of understanding? I argue that fantastic-historical narratives are particularly well-suited to addressing the existential concerns of the present, to forging an emotional connection with the past, and to conveying a sense of the strangeness and novelty of past events.

By viewing my own work through this practice-based lens and by considering its place within the wider literary landscape, I hope to offer a new perspective on what historical fiction is, what it does, how it is constructed, its purpose, its capabilities, and its possible future directions.



3. View looking east from Foxley Road towards Malmesbury Abbey. The abbey's prominent position on the highest point between two branches of the River Avon would have made it an ideal location from which to attempt a flight.

Chapter 1: Processes, approaches, philosophies

What does it mean to write historical fiction in the twenty-first century? How do we construct a sense of the past, and how is that sense communicated to our readership? It is common for novelists, both literary and commercial, to voice their concern for what we might call the ‘historicalness’ of their work, which is to say its accuracy (fidelity to historical chronology, events and biography) and its authenticity (sensitivity towards the social and material conditions of life in one’s chosen period). One of the best-known proponents of this philosophy is Hilary Mantel, whose trilogy based on the life and career of Thomas Cromwell has achieved commercial success, won widespread critical acclaim, and delivered two Booker Prize victories: in 2009 for *Wolf Hall*; and in 2012 for *Bring Up the Bodies*. In an interview for *The New Yorker*, Mantel expresses her commitment to historical ‘facts’ in the strongest terms: ‘I cannot describe to you what revulsion it inspires in me when people play around with the facts. If I were to distort something just to make it more convenient or dramatic, I would feel I’d failed as a writer.’¹³ In response to a question during one of her 2017 BBC Reith Lectures regarding how far she would allow herself ‘to stray from history to tell a good story’, she replies: ‘The reason *I don’t simply make it up* [my italics] is that I’ve become interested in art that’s found, as well as art one creates. And I think the great strength of historical

¹³ Larissa MacFarquhar, ‘The Dead Are Real: Hilary Mantel’s Imagination’, *The New Yorker*, 15 October 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/15/the-dead-are-real>. Mantel’s reference to historical ‘facts’ is worth noting, implying as it does an understanding of the past as something fixed and uncontested. In the wake of postmodernism, many historians nowadays would dispute the concept of objective, unproblematised or absolute facts that stand independently of sources and evidence. Mantel’s position here thus seems somewhat simplistic and at odds with recent historiographical thinking. I return to the notions of ‘facts’ and ‘truth’ in relation to the study of history in Chapter 2.

fiction is that it allows you to find art in the common record, in our common story.¹⁴ Elsewhere she has argued in similar terms that the value of historical fiction comes from '[f]inding a shape, rather than imposing a shape.'¹⁵ For Mantel, the key imaginative act involved in writing fiction set in the past is one of interpolation, working in the 'gaps and inconsistencies', the 'cracks and fissures'.¹⁶ She considers it acceptable to conjecture an individual's thoughts, feelings and 'inner torments' (which cannot be known for certain), but not to make up details even as minute as the colour of that same individual's drawing room wallpaper (which potentially could be known by someone, somewhere).¹⁷ It is indicative of her philosophy that every named character but one in her first two Cromwell novels is based on a historical individual; the one exception, Christophe in *Bring Up the Bodies*, is an extrapolation of a person who is mentioned but unnamed in the primary sources.¹⁸ As Lisa Fletcher observes, in many ways Mantel's philosophies 'suggest a writer closer in spirit to historians than novelists'.¹⁹

The notion that novelists have a responsibility to depict the past in a historically faithful manner is widespread – and yet, as I argue in the first two chapters of this commentary, there are a number of reasons to be apprehensive about what I term the 'historical-ethical imperative' and the claims of those who subscribe to it. One of the reasons, as I will show in this chapter, is that while novelists such as Mantel are often keen to stress the historical underpinnings of their

¹⁴ Hilary Mantel, 'The Iron Maiden' (BBC, 2017), 8, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2017/reith_2017_hilary_mantel_lecture2.pdf.

¹⁵ Mona Simpson, 'Hilary Mantel, Art of Fiction No. 226', *The Paris Review*, Spring 2015, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6360/art-of-fiction-no-226-hilary-mantel>.

¹⁶ Mantel, 'The Iron Maiden', 5.

¹⁷ Hilary Mantel, 'The Day Is for the Living' (BBC, 2017), 5, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2017/reith_2017_hilary_mantel_lecture1.pdf.

¹⁸ Lisa Fletcher, 'Hilary Mantel: Raising the Dead, Speaking the Truth', in *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000*, ed. James Acheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 40.

¹⁹ Fletcher, 41.

fictions, their texts frequently approach and render the past in ways that in fact are little concerned with history. Whatever historical-ethical sensibility a text might possess is invariably inflected and complicated by the writer's use of other 'modes' of pastness, such as past-as-memory, past-as-trauma, contrapuntal pasts, past-as-haunting and past-as-fable. This is true of *Flight*, and it is also true of *Wolf Hall*. Building upon the work of Robert Eaglestone and Robyn Stewart, I offer an alternative framework for understanding and comparing fictions based upon these various modes, and examine how writers – myself included – employ them in combinations within their works. I argue that, by focussing on the modes by which historical fictions of different kinds operate, we are better placed to find hidden commonalities between what on the surface might appear to be very dissimilar works. Not only that, but a modal analysis of this sort reveals the various and even sometimes contradictory renderings of the past that can co-exist within a single text, suggesting that the historical novel ought not to be regarded in terms of a straightforward dialogue between past and present, but rather as a discursive space in which multiple meanings of the past are contemplated and discussed.

Exactly what constitutes contemporary historical fiction is hard to define. The genre is a broad church, as Mantel has acknowledged: 'there are so many types [...] Some have the feel of documentary, others are close to fantasy.'²⁰ Jerome de Groot's 2010 study, *The Historical Novel*, bears witness to the vast range of styles and forms that fall under this banner. Charting historical fiction's development from its origins through to the twenty-first century, de Groot examines a dizzying array of subgenres, including romance, crime, adventure, thriller, counterfactual, postmodernist and historiographic metafiction (fiction that self-consciously analyses its own representation of the past). Almost every conceivable flavour of historical novel is represented in his book, from both the literary and the commercial ends of the publishing spectrum, and covering settings from the ancient world to

²⁰ Mantel, 'The Day Is for the Living', 4.

the twentieth century. De Groot argues that one of historical fiction's defining characteristics is its 'intergeneric hybridity and flexibility', although why it should be (if indeed it is) any more receptive to hybridity than, say, crime fiction or science fiction is not clear.²¹ One might be forgiven for wondering what qualities all these novels are supposed to have in common, beyond the basic fact that they are all set in the past. Faced with such a broad range of literary forms, it is easy to sympathise with Mantel's complaint, made shortly after winning the Booker Prize for the first time for *Wolf Hall* in 2009, that '[t]he boundaries of the term "historical fiction" are now so wide that it's almost meaningless'. This lack of definition has, she contends, made the genre suspect in the eyes of commentators: 'use of the term is beginning to look like an accusation, a stick to beat writers with: you're historical, you weaselly good-for-nothing, you luxury, you parasite. The accusation is that authors are ducking the tough issues in favour of writing about frocks.' Her main worry is that critics are conflating certain styles of commercial historical fiction ('chick-lit with wimples') with what she regards as more serious literary fiction set in the past.²² Her implication is that the catch-all term 'historical fiction' is barely fit for purpose: we need to be able to distinguish between different kinds of engagement with the past.

If commentators and critics were sniffy about the genre in 2009, they are arguably less likely to be so nowadays. Thanks in large part to Mantel's two Booker Prize successes in 2009 and 2012, however, historical fiction's stock has arguably never been higher. Sales are healthy – not just of the literary variety but of the commercial too, insofar as it is possible to distinguish between the two categories. (Such distinctions are increasingly being eroded, as Daniel Lea observes, with the expansion of a 'middle ground' between high and low, avant-garde and

²¹ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 2.

²² Hilary Mantel, 'Booker Winner Hilary Mantel on Dealing with History in Fiction', *The Guardian*, 17 October 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/17/hilary-mantel-author-booker>.

conventional, literary and generic.)²³ My own ‘break’ as a professional writer can be ascribed partly to the rise of the ‘military historical novel’ made popular in the first decade of this century by Bernard Cornwell, Conn Iggulden, Simon Scarrow, Robyn Young and others. My debut novel, *Sworn Sword*, which was written very much in this vein, was published in 2011 at a time when publishers’ and readers’ interest in this particular flavour of commercial historical fiction was approaching its peak.²⁴ Possibly owing to the popularity of this and similar types of commercial historical fiction, a certain sniffiness towards the genre can still be detected, although it is sometimes articulated in slightly more subtle ways. Jenny Bavidge says of Mantel’s work: ‘The controlled style and scholarly historical research which characterises *Wolf Hall* may conceal or filter the weird imagination and comically bleak outlook present in her earlier works, but its pulse and presence complicates the works in ways which resist a definition of the Trilogy as “*merely*” *historical* [my italics].’²⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, in the introduction to his recent biography of Thomas Cromwell, expresses a similar view. ‘To call Mantel’s series ‘historical novels’, he says, ‘does them an injustice; they are novels which happen to be set in the sixteenth century, and with a profound knowledge of how that era functioned.’²⁶ It is telling that, in trying to express what they see as Mantel’s principal achievements, neither Bavidge nor MacCulloch find the label ‘historical fiction’ sufficiently useful: their view seems to be that serious literature set in the past transcends the genre. Bavidge’s assessment is doubly interesting, since she draws

²³ Daniel Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Contemporary British Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 14–16.

²⁴ A good survey of the main themes and conventions of the ‘military historical’ subgenre – particularly referring to titles published at this peak, in late 2011 and early 2012 – can be found in Jerome de Groot, *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 37–42. Unfortunately de Groot’s analysis does not feature *Sworn Sword*.

²⁵ Jenny Bavidge, ‘Hilary Mantel’, in *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First-Century Literary Fiction*, ed. Daniel O’Gorman and Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2019), 416.

²⁶ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 1.

attention to the particular character of Mantel's prose, and the role that style and form play in communicating and complicating a sense of the past.

Mantel, Bavidge and MacCulloch all seek to draw distinctions between different kinds of engagements with the past – distinctions that might be (and have often been) framed in terms of the commercial and the literary, the playful and the serious, or the surface-level and the profound. However, simple binary oppositions like these are not the only, or even the most useful way, of conceptualising what Robert Eaglestone calls the 'dazzling range of contemporary fiction about the past' – a range that he notes is growing ever more diverse and contradictory, encompassing 'forms which far exceed the historical novel as usually conceived.'²⁷ To try to make sense of this material, instead of employing conventional genre-based terminology, Eaglestone conceptualises it in terms of a number of *modes*, each of which 'implies a different philosophy of history' and involves a different set of strategies for engaging or interacting with the past.²⁸ These modes, he suggests, include but are not limited to: past-as-fable; past-as-memory; contrapuntal pasts; past-as-haunting; past-as-possession; and past-as-trauma.²⁹ We might well add to this list a few categories of our own, such as past-as-nostalgia, past-as-sanctuary, past-as-romance, past-as-spectacle and – especially relevant when discussing fictions that possess a strong relationship to historical sources or mimic their forms – documented pasts. Each of these modes lends itself to a different way of thinking about, accessing, understanding or coming to terms with the past. In this way, Eaglestone offers what is potentially a more useful descriptive framework for considering how fiction deals with the past – one which draws meaningful distinctions between various approaches and does not rely on difficult value-judgements of whether a given approach to historical fiction is 'good' or 'bad', 'commercial' or 'literary', or more or less 'authentic', 'accurate' or 'truthful' than another: he regards none of these modes as inherently more or less valid than the others. His

²⁷ Eaglestone, 'The Past', 312.

²⁸ Eaglestone, 319.

²⁹ Eaglestone, 312–19.

framework allows for fictional treatments of the past that are founded in myth as well as those that are underpinned by a strong historical-ethical sensibility, and affords equal legitimacy to both kinds. His modal system is not limited to novels set *in* the past, either, but can be extended to include fiction set in the present day in which the past forms a central theme – one of his chosen exemplars is Nicola Barker’s 2007 novel *Darkmans*, which is set in the early twenty-first century – and even to counterfactual novels.

Nevertheless, categorising texts according to these various modes is not quite as straightforward as Eaglestone makes out. He chooses Kazuo Ishiguro’s 2015 novel *The Buried Giant* as his principal exemplar for the past-as-fable mode: a classification which, on the face of it, is entirely reasonable. The novel contains many fabulous elements that invite an allegorical rather than a literal reading. It is set in a mythic post-Roman past that invokes Arthurian legend more than it does any kind of recognisably historical sixth-century Britain; its narrator is revealed to be a possibly immortal ferryman figure resembling Charon of Greek mythology; and the plot revolves around supernatural entities and phenomena in the form of the she-dragon, Querig, and the enchanted mist she exhales that imposes a collective amnesia over the land. This mist, it transpires, has allowed an uneasy peace to prevail between the Saxons and the Britons by suppressing memories of King Arthur’s long-ago mass slaughter of the former: an atrocity that, Eaglestone points out, could easily be read as an allegory for any number of real-life genocides or ethnic cleansings from the past.³⁰ Ishiguro himself, in an interview with the *Guardian* around the time of the book’s publication, cites in particular the example of the massacre at Srebrenica during the Bosnian War.³¹ The cycle of violence and counter-violence prophesied by the Saxon warrior Wistan after his slaying of

³⁰ Eaglestone, 313.

³¹ Alex Clark, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro’s Turn to Fantasy’, *The Guardian*, 19 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/19/kazuo-ishiguro-the-buried-giant-novel-interview>.

Querig similarly recalls countless struggles from world history.³² The reader of *The Buried Giant* is encouraged to reflect upon such events – especially those that have at one time or another been denied or covered up, or have otherwise fallen out of collective memory, or that are at risk of being forgotten in future. Thus while *The Buried Giant* might not be historical fiction in the conventional sense of the term, it is nevertheless a novel deeply concerned with the past, and with the continuing effects of the past. But if it is a fable, then it is a flawed one. Whereas fables are often concerned with conveying moral lessons, *The Buried Giant* resists such straightforward messaging. Instead the central moral questions – whether ignorance or knowledge is preferable, and whether it is better for terrible events to persist in memory or to be forgotten – remain unresolved at the novel's conclusion.

In any case, characterising *The Buried Giant's* engagement with the past purely in terms of its fabulous elements is too simplistic. Equally central to the novel is the past-as-possession mode. Dim recollections of the son they haven't seen for years – the son with whom they wish to be reunited – are what compel the protagonists, Axl and Beatrice, to leave their community and set out on their journey in the first place. ('There's a journey we must go on, and no more delay.'³³) The past maintains a hold over the principal characters; their determination to seek it out is what drives them on, despite multiple challenges and hazards. If there is any lesson to be learned in Wistan's slaying of the dragon, it is that the past might be suppressed for a time, but it can never be fully silenced. As Axl says immediately afterwards: 'Yet who knows what old hatreds will loosen across the land now? [...] Who knows what will come when quick-tongued men make ancient grievances rhyme with fresh desire for land and conquest?'³⁴ The violence between Britons and Saxons that is to come might be framed in terms of new concerns, but it will be in essence a re-fighting of old battles, driven by the past.

³² Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 340.

³³ Ishiguro, 20.

³⁴ Ishiguro, 340.

The past, for good or for ill, maintains its grip on the present and continues to determine the course of events.

Past-as-trauma is also a key theme of Ishiguro's novel, in which the mist of forgetting acts as a powerful metaphor for the societal repression of what is clearly a troubling and difficult collective memory, the re-emergence of which is liable to cause considerable harm, as Axl recognises. (Trauma both personal and cultural is a longstanding and consistent subject of Ishiguro's fiction, as Daniel Bedggood points out; indeed, the recounting of the past often takes on a therapeutic function for his protagonists – Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, or Kathy H. in *Never Let Me Go* – as they come to terms with the traumas they have suffered.³⁵) And there is at the same time a strong contrapuntal dimension to *The Buried Giant*, in the sense that Ishiguro deliberately rewrites traditional Arthurian narratives. Although these narratives are mythic in character, they are historical in origin, deriving as they do from a literary genre – romance – that, as Barbara Newman points out, is 'supremely medieval'.³⁶ Ishiguro's treatment of the character of Sir Gawain offers as good example of his contrapuntal approach. In the medieval tradition, Gawain is Arthur's youngest knight, but Ishiguro renders him in this post-Arthurian setting as an old man, unthreatening and unprepossessing, with white hair and rusty armour.³⁷ Even more striking are his portrayals of two of the most iconic characters in the tradition: Arthur himself; and Merlin. By revealing Arthur to have been the perpetrator of atrocities against the Saxons, with Merlin complicit in the cover-up (it is he who casts the enchantment over Querig that causes her to emit the mist of forgetting), Ishiguro actively repositions these characters, depicting them not merely as flawed or fallen heroes but as war criminals. In these ways the novel does not simply build upon the Arthurian legends familiar to readers; it

³⁵ Daniel Bedggood, 'Kazuo Ishiguro: Alternate Histories', in *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000*, ed. James Acheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 109–10, 116.

³⁶ Barbara Newman, 'Of Burnable Books and Buried Giants: Two Modes of Historical Fiction', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 329.

³⁷ Bedggood, 'Kazuo Ishiguro', 115; Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, 119.

purposefully rewrites them. In so doing it calls into question traditional narratives, and works directly against the medieval romances from which it takes its inspiration.

Eagleton's modes, then, need not be regarded as mutually exclusive; rather, they can exist in combination. Mantel's Cromwell novels offer another case in point: it is hard to summarise them as the products of any one single mode. The past she evokes is contrapuntal in the sense that she seeks to 'reclaim' their protagonist. Mantel is open about her intentions in this regard: 'When you're writing historical fiction, you are always looking for the untold story. You're looking for what has been repressed politically, or repressed psychologically.'³⁸ Prior to *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell had usually been portrayed in literature and on screen as the villain at Henry VIII's court, which, Lisa Fletcher points out, has rendered him an 'unlikely hero' in the eyes of many reviewers.³⁹ Hugh Trevor-Roper describes the historical Cromwell as 'an iron-fisted bureaucrat', and suggests that this, 'perhaps, is why he has been so disliked'.⁴⁰ By exploring Cromwell's inner world – his thoughts, feelings, desires, fears – Mantel endows him with a humanity that is at odds with these earlier imaginings. The 'grammatical intimacy' afforded by writing in the present tense and from a close third-person perspective focussed on her protagonist – 'positioning readers at Cromwell's shoulder to watch events unfold without the benefit of hindsight' – encourages the reader to identify with him.⁴¹ This intimacy is intensified when, during scenes of particular emotional significance, the narration slips briefly into first- and second-person, as when he first learns of the death of his wife, Liz: 'There's something wrong when you arrive home at dusk but torches are burning. The air is sweet and you feel so well as you walk in, you feel young, unscarred. Then you see the dismayed faces; they turn

³⁸ Hilary Mantel, 'Can These Bones Live?' (BBC, 2017), 9, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2017/reith_2017_hilary_mantel_lecture%204.pdf.

³⁹ Fletcher, 'Raising the Dead', 41.

⁴⁰ Quoted in MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell*, xxiv.

⁴¹ Fletcher, 'Raising the Dead', 42–3.

away at the sight of you.’⁴² The abrupt change of pronouns evokes Cromwell’s sudden disconnectedness – his sense of observing himself from outside his own body. At the same time, it acts as a direct appeal to readers, asking them to imagine themselves in Cromwell’s shoes at this harrowing turning-point in his life.⁴³

At other times, however, Mantel’s approach seems more akin to the modes Eaglestone describes as past-as-memory and past-as-haunting. Her aim, she says, is ‘to duplicate not the historian’s chronology but the way memory works: in leaps, loops, flashes’.⁴⁴ We see this reflected in her prose technique: the narrative in *Wolf Hall* does not unfold continuously but in staccato bursts, often with abrupt transitions between scenes that resemble the filmmaker’s smash cut. The chronology is uneven, with frequent lacunae, the most significant of which occurs early in the novel: 27 years, encompassing Cromwell’s early adult life, elapse between the first and second chapters. This particular lacuna stems, it would seem, from a lack of reliable source material for the beginning of Cromwell’s career.⁴⁵ Over the course of the novel, other characters proceed to fill this gap in his biography with their imagined tales of his exploits in Europe, which he does not contest: the haziness surrounding his early years allows him to position himself as many things to many people. (Indeed, one wonders if this is how the real Cromwell seemed to his contemporaries: a man of rather mysterious origins.) Like her protagonist, Mantel uses these missing years to her advantage, establishing a sense of the past that, like memory, is fragmented and uneven, shifting and unstable and difficult to determine. And yet elsewhere in *Wolf Hall* the sense of the past is far from hazy; instead it is vivid and resurgent. Cromwell is stalked by the presence of those he has known: both his former employer Cardinal Wolsey (‘In these courts, Wolsey lingers [...] Turn any corner, and you will think you will see my lord’) and his wife

⁴² Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: 4th Estate, 2019), 101.

⁴³ Fletcher, ‘Raising the Dead’, 42–3.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Bavidge, ‘Hilary Mantel’, 422.

⁴⁵ Our principal source for these missing years in Cromwell’s biography is an Italian novella by Matteo Bandello: MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell*, 22–3.

(‘she neither stays nor goes. She is always with him and not with him’; ‘Liz, he thinks, take your dead hand off me’).⁴⁶ The dead lie close to the surface: ‘loose rattling bones under the paving of the Tower, those bones bricked into staircases and mulched into the Thames mud.’⁴⁷ In all these examples we see the past-as-haunting mode in action. Indeed Fletcher observes how critics have often used metaphors of haunting to describe Mantel’s craft, praising her ‘ability to summon up ghosts’ and casting her as a ‘medium’ channelling the spirits of the dead.⁴⁸ The author herself frequently frames her work in this fashion: the title of her Reith Lecture series is ‘Resurrection: the Art and the Craft’. During these lectures she frequently likens her process to raising, chasing, or meeting with the dead; she readily agrees with the suggestion made by a member of the audience that what she is really writing are ghost stories.⁴⁹ (Such imagery is not unique to Mantel; it is interesting to note that Margaret Atwood uses similar imagery in relation to her craft, as in the title of her essay collection *Negotiating with the Dead*.)⁵⁰

My own novel, *Flight*, similarly makes use of a number of modes, of which the three most prominent (by my own reading) are past-as-trauma, past-as-haunting, and past-as-fable. Both the main characters spend the novel struggling with their respective traumas: for Ealdgyth, the murder of her husband, her subsequent dispossession and her imprisonment at the abbey; for Eilmer, his ill-fated attempt at flight and the resulting loss of the use of his legs. For both of them, the past infringes on the present, with negative emotional consequences; it is something that they find difficult to talk about openly. Ealdgyth is unforthcoming about her own

⁴⁶ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 270, 584, 599.

⁴⁷ Mantel, 97.

⁴⁸ Fletcher, ‘Raising the Dead’, 39.

⁴⁹ Mantel, ‘The Day Is for the Living’, 1–2; Mantel, ‘Can These Bones Live?’, 9.

⁵⁰ Atwood in fact goes one step further than Mantel, linking *all* narrative writing – not just that which is concerned with the past – to a fascination with mortality and a desire to bring people and things back from the dead: Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 156.

backstory, of which we learn only a few fragmented details over the course of the novel. Eilmer's continued reluctance to discuss his accident (31–2, 114, 250), meanwhile, points towards a desire to suppress his own trauma – a desire that can never be fully realised, since his bodily limitations serve as a constant reminder to himself and to those around him. As becomes increasingly apparent, he is reliant on the physical and spiritual help of others; in this respect, his trauma is shared by the entire monastic community. It is for the well-being of the community, Ceolred explains, that most of Eilmer's designs and other writings were destroyed after his accident (78–9). Often the past irrupts uninvited into the present moment, like a sudden pain, as in the short scene early in the novel in which Ealdgyth describes being violently abducted from her home (19: 'Huddled in the dark, by the hearth and the last embers. The door shudders on its hinges, and I know it won't hold for long. They're trying to break it down'). This scene, a flashback, occurs chronologically out of sequence in the narrative and ends as abruptly as it begins: the framing is as violent as the content itself.

The past in *Flight* is thus unable to be suppressed entirely, as much as the characters might wish it to be. As in *Wolf Hall*, it lingers, haunting the present, refusing to let go. Ealdgyth is literally haunted by several entities: by a vision of a young Eilmer that appears to her briefly in the infirmary (74); by an unspecified, disembodied voice or group of voices that speaks intermittently to her (21–2, 73–4, 137); but most significantly of all by the ghost of her husband Siferth, who manifests three times during the course of the novel to offer warnings and wisdom (45–6, 96–7, 237–41). Meanwhile it gradually transpires that the whole monastic community is collectively haunted by events that occurred ten years previously; grievances once presumed to be buried deep turn out in fact to lie close to the surface (66–7, 222). Within this community, the living and the dead not only cohabit but intrude upon each other's spaces: the blossoming branches in the orchard overhang ancient grave-markers (13); the names of monks both present and past are preserved together in the monastery's *liber vitae*, or 'book of life' (186). Pybba is given up for dead by his fellow monks, only to rise from his deathbed in what initially appears to be a miraculous recovery – except that when Ealdgyth next sees him some days later, he is a shadow of his former self, transformed by

his ordeal into a frail, pallid creature akin to a revenant or a spectre (148).

Throughout the novel, the dead refuse to go quietly. The past constantly demands the attention of those living in the present, and continues to burden them. It is worth pointing out, too, that the novel is narrated in the present tense, the effect of which is not only to grant Ealdgyth's story more immediacy but also to reanimate the past, by establishing the illusion of life-being-lived rather than of story-being-told. The dead arise once more; the past is made present.

Perhaps the most significant mode I employ in the novel, however, is that of past-as-fable. The novel's unwillingness to commit to a specific historical context – there is no overt mention in the text of when or where it is supposed to be set – means that the events it depicts are positioned in some sense outside of time and space, in a world that is undoubtedly past rather than present, but suspended somewhere between the mythic and the historical, the fabulous and the real.

Moreover, *Flight* contains many fantastic elements that, as in *The Buried Giant*, open up the possibility of allegorical as well as literal readings. Just as Ealdgyth and the monks actively seek deeper meaning in the world around them – and particularly in the various marvels they witness taking place – so the reader is encouraged to attach allegorical significance to the events of the novel. (I will discuss in greater depth the implications of this peculiar positioning between the mythic and the historical in Chapter 2, and the precise effects of the novel's fantastic elements in Chapter 3.) Within the narrative itself, the two main characters both encounter difficulties in working out whether the stories they are told represent the truth, or whether they fit into the category of fable, and thus frequently mistake one for the other. Eilmer's interest in the concept of human flight stems from the tale of Daedalus: 'A fable that was meant as a warning [...] he mistook for an example to follow', says the abbot, implying that Eilmer may well have come to believe in the tale's literal truth (66).⁵¹ Conversely, when Eilmer reveals that his attempted flight did not end swiftly with a vertical fall as Ealdgyth had been led to believe, but that

⁵¹ That Eilmer's endeavours were inspired by the 'fable' ('fabulam') of Daedalus is a detail I have carried over from William of Malmesbury's account of his flight (reproduced in the Appendix): William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:413–15.

in fact he succeeded in travelling for six hundred feet before he crashed, she at first refuses to accept his story ('But it's impossible') and then grows angry at him for taking her for a fool and having a joke at her expense (120). To her, the notion that a man might fly seems simply too fanciful – too fabulous – to be plausible. In a similar way, the story she shares with him during their final meeting, regarding her role in Pybba's extraordinary recovery, is too fanciful for Eilmer to believe (251). This tension between, on the one hand, a willingness to believe in fables and, on the other, a desire to seek out the unadorned truth is a recurring theme: one particular expression of the novel's broader exploration of questions of faith and scepticism. The same tension is, I believe, a fundamental quality of all fiction set in the past, which consciously conflates the real (history) with the made-up (myth), and makes creative use of the interplay between the two. The difficulty that Ealdgyth and Eilmer experience in distinguishing fable from truth is analogous to the difficulty that a reader of historical fiction might experience in attempting to unpick what is real from what is not. In this way the use of the past-as-fable mode allows *Flight* to reflexively examine its own workings: among other things, it can be read as a historical fiction *about* historical fiction.

Ishiguro, Mantel and I thus all combine various and even at times seemingly contradictory strategies for conveying different senses of the past. The use of multiple modes shows us that a text's consideration for the past is not always simple or straightforward, but can be complex and multi-layered. As the examples above show, there are always at least two pasts represented in these works: the one in which the main narrative unfolds (the setting), and the one belonging to the characters within that narrative (what we might call the diegetic past). (As Mantel says: 'Beneath every history, there is another history'.)⁵² The past can therefore be approached, deployed and interpreted in multiple ways within the same text, overlapping and sometimes competing and conflicting with each other – not so much historical fiction, perhaps, as historical *friction*. Robyn Stewart suggests the term 'bricolage' to describe this process of combining multiple approaches within a

⁵² Mantel, 'The Day Is for the Living', 6. Cf. Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 66.

hybrid praxis: 'In creating a bricolage, the bricoleur appropriates available methods, strategies and empirical materials or invents or pieces together new tools as necessary', working both 'within and between competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms.'⁵³ Stewart's main concern is with art that takes place within an academic context – that is, practice-as-research – where the aim of this hybridity is to generate new knowledge or theory, but there is no reason why the same terminology cannot be applied to art generated in other contexts too.

Thinking of novels as bricolages made up of multiple approaches is useful for several reasons. To begin with, this model offers a way of broadening the discussion in a way that is more reflective of the aims and preoccupations of practitioners as well as the concerns of theorists. The composition of any creative work is usually the product of several methods and philosophies, and of both conscious and unconscious processes: it involves compromises between design and instinct, requires at different times careful planning and an ability and willingness to improvise, and draws its inspiration and influences from a variety of sources. Rarely is a novel (or any other artwork, for that matter) intended to communicate a single, well-defined message or meaning; indeed the most interesting works are often those that open themselves up to multiple readings or offer more than one angle from which to view a given subject. A historical novel, then, is best considered as a 'discursive space' where debates about the meaning(s) of the past – among other subjects – can take place.⁵⁴ The modal bricolage framework reflects this by recognising the complexity of the artistic process and its overlapping objectives. At the same time it provides a more sophisticated model for understanding fictional approaches to the past than a simplistic spectrum ranging from texts bearing a close relationship to the historical record at one end, and those bearing a very loose relationship at the other. Such a model is urgently needed; as de Groot has observed: 'It is uncommon still for scholarship to look seriously at the ways in which

⁵³ Robyn Stewart, 'Creating New Stories for Praxis: Navigations, Narrations, Neonarratives', in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 127.

⁵⁴ de Groot, *Remaking History*, 2.

historical fictions might work, other than to analyse their *representation* of the past. [...] Simply put, research into historical fiction has been bedevilled by an overriding concern about the *historicalness* of such work.⁵⁵ This new framework allows us to look beyond the notion of historicalness, which represents only one (and not necessarily the most important) aspect of fiction set in the past, and to appreciate its multiple and diverse functions. Indeed, it allows us to see these works more clearly not only as dialogues between past and present, but also as conversations between different and even contradictory renderings of the past. In so doing, it also brings into focus the methods by which certain novelists try to address the challenges of postmodernism, which rejects grand narratives such as those produced by historical enquiry, and suggests instead that the world (including the past) is inherently unknowable, subjective and unstable.⁵⁶ As a result of this modal bricolage framework we are able to see, for example, how it is possible both to strive for a faithful reconstruction of the past, and simultaneously to admit that the reconstruction is uncertain or provisional at best. Mantel's public comments regarding her creative process suggest that she commits wholeheartedly to the 'reality of history', to use Peter Boxall's phrase – that is, she seeks in her writing to reclaim a concrete sense of an objective past and how it was lived.⁵⁷ However, her use of various modes, which inflect and complicate the act of reclamation, serves as an implicit acknowledgement of the difficulty and perhaps the ultimate impossibility of such a task.

For all of these reasons, I suggest that the modal bricolage framework offers a more useful way of classifying, considering and comparing different works than that of genre and subgenre. It seems to me that the category we have come to know as 'historical fiction' is now too amorphous, too wide-ranging, its boundaries too porous, for the term to be sustainable except as a broad and convenient shorthand for 'fiction set in the past'. Moreover, the category is only growing

⁵⁵ de Groot, 3.

⁵⁶ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 110, 185.

⁵⁷ Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 41.

more amorphous with time, as Mantel, de Groot and Eaglestone have all remarked upon in their different ways. The philosophies and strategies by which contemporary literature approaches the past are manifold and complex, perhaps more so now than ever. By thinking of historical novels in terms of the modes they employ, however, we are able to bring into sharper focus some of the complexities and nuances involved in constructing and communicating a sense of the past.



4. View from Abbey Row, looking south across the steeply sloping ground immediately to the west of Malmesbury Abbey (not in shot). The church, St Paul's, stands in the southwest corner of the abbey churchyard. Its tower and spire are a combined 120ft tall.

Chapter 2: Objectives, commitments, responsibilities

As we have seen, not all fiction set in the past operates in the same way. Novels engage with their chosen periods through the use of multiple modes that are reflected in their form, content and narrative style. Even when an author professes his or her commitment towards achieving a faithful representation of a given historical subject, as Hilary Mantel does, the historicalness of the end product is inevitably inflected and complicated to some degree. Having thus explored some of the various approaches taken by novelists in rendering the past, in this chapter I consider the objectives, commitments and responsibilities of fiction set in the past. I ask to what extent it has a responsibility to try to represent the past in a historically faithful manner (a common expectation of critics and readers alike), and whether or not this is a valid expectation, and what might be gained from alternative strategies, such as the one I have taken in writing *Flight*. If the broad underlying question running through Chapter 1 was, ‘What is historical fiction in the twenty-first century?’, Chapter 2 asks, ‘What is historical fiction in the twenty-first century *for*?’

In the Introduction I touched upon what Peter Boxall has discerned as a new ‘historical consciousness’ in contemporary literature. This consciousness, he argues, is characterised by ‘the emergence of a new historical mood, a new and different structure of historical feeling’, ‘a fresh commitment to what we might call the reality of history’ that is ‘grounded in a keen awareness of history as event, history as a material force’.⁵⁸ This new historical mood, he argues, both inherits the legacy of postmodernism and is a reaction against it: for while he identifies ‘a keen awareness, reverberating through the culture, of the difficulty of accessing anything like a real history, a history which is not shaped and distorted by the

⁵⁸ Boxall, 41, 58.

narrative forms in which we encounter it', this is set against a renewed 'sense of a historical and ethical imperative', of '*responsibility* [his italics] to material historical forces that constrain or shape the fictional imagination'.⁵⁹ Two texts that exemplify this new mood, according to Boxall, are Ali Smith's *The Accidental* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.⁶⁰ A similar historical-ethical imperative can also be observed at work in Laurent Binet's *HHhH* – about the plot to assassinate Richard Heydrich during the Second World War – and Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. In an interview with Monica Latham, Binet summarises the central theme of his book as 'the fanatical search for historical truth'.⁶¹ Meanwhile the metanarrative strand that runs through the text – in which he describes his struggle with the vagaries of his sources, his unease regarding 'novelistic invention', his frustration at the enormity of his subject and his doubts about his inability to do it justice – foregrounds his prevailing desire to arrive at the truth, or as close to it as he possibly can.⁶² In much the same way, Hilary Mantel's stated reluctance to 'simply make it up', her concern that fiction should not 'betray' history (an oddly emotive choice of word), her insistence that novelists 'should not pass on error', and her stern injunction against incorporating falsehoods ('I have one piece of advice: don't lie. Don't go against known facts') all indicate a writer guided by a double sense of responsibility: towards her readership; and towards the past itself.⁶³

In this chapter I unpack and critique these notions of responsibility, which are widely shared by writers of historical fiction, both literary and commercial. In

⁵⁹ Boxall, 41–2.

⁶⁰ Boxall, 59–79.

⁶¹ Laurent Binet and Monica Latham, 'Reflections on Truth, Veracity, Fictionalization, and Falsification', in *Conversations with Biographical Novelists: Truthful Fictions across the Globe*, ed. Michael Lackey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 37.

⁶² Binet, *HHhH*, chaps 101, 107, 150.

⁶³ Mantel, 'The Iron Maiden', 5, 8; Hilary Mantel, 'Adaptation' (BBC, 2017), 2, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2017/reith_2017_hilary_mantel_lecture%205.pdf; Mantel, 'Can These Bones Live?', 4.

particular I focus on what (to borrow and adapt one of Boxall's phrases) I term the 'historical-ethical imperative': the idea that the novelist should aim to offer a representation of the past that is both accurate (faithful to historical chronology, events and biography) and authentic (sensitive towards the social and material conditions of life in one's chosen period). Not only is this historical-ethical imperative at odds with fiction's narrative priorities, but also, as Boxall seems to concede, it would appear to set constraints upon its imaginative potential. Moreover, as I will show, it is always likely to be frustrated, since a text's commitment to accuracy and authenticity can never be more than partial. I argue that, through relieving itself of some of the burdens associated with the historical-ethical imperative, fiction can reclaim a sense of its own legitimacy as a medium for contributing towards discussion of the past. Even if it does not absolve itself entirely of historical responsibilities, it can be selective in how it observes those responsibilities. A novel might, for example, strive for authenticity without claiming accuracy: these two components of the historical-ethical imperative are complementary and yet independent of one another, as the example of *Flight* illustrates. Even though my novel does not adhere to recorded events or biographical details and in fact makes no explicit claim to belong to a specific historical context, nevertheless it seeks to communicate an authentic sense of early eleventh-century England: through its deployment of period-appropriate details derived from primary sources, it attempts to convey the social and material conditions of life in that time and place. *Flight* can thus be said to oscillate between the mythic and the historical, neither quite one nor the other. As such, it offers a vision of a past that is quite different from that offered by Mantel and *Wolf Hall*: not entirely concrete but shifting, provisional, shady and always a little out of focus. It represents an approach to writing fiction set in the past that differs not only in terms of its subject and themes and its modes of pastness, but also in its broader attitude to and relationship with history.

Although it may well have acquired a new relevance and force in the wake of the postmodernist challenge, the notion that historical novelists have responsibilities –

both to the faithful representation of their subject matter, and to their readers – is not particularly new, but rather widespread and longstanding. Unlike writers of other forms of fiction, we often incorporate self-reflection and exegesis into our texts in which we examine our narratives’ relationships with history, cite our primary and secondary sources and explain how we have used them, indicate where we have adopted stances that are not universally accepted, and highlight whatever creative liberties we might have taken with the historical record. In doing so we seek to establish both the narrative’s historical credentials and our own scholarly authority, confess to invention or misrepresentation, and, if necessary, set the record straight – or so the theory goes. Most commonly this exegesis takes the form of an afterword or ‘historical note’ (although in historiographic metafiction such as Binet’s *HHbH* it might be enfolded within the text itself). The practice of exegesis, which is particularly widespread at the commercial end of the market but not uncommon at the literary end, has a long tradition within the genre. It can be traced back to Walter Scott’s *Waverley* (1814) – often held up as the progenitor of the modern historical novel – which, as Jerome de Groot points out, includes extensive authorial notes to support the narrative and place it in a social and cultural context.⁶⁴ In the twenty-first century novel, historical notes can vary widely in length and scope: those in Hannah Kent’s *Burial Rites* and Robyn Cadwallader’s *The Anchoress* run to no more than three pages each; while at the other extreme, C.J. Sansom, a historian by training, concludes his latest Tudor-era mystery *Tombland* with a 50-page essay (plus ten pages of endnotes and three more of suggested further reading).⁶⁵

Indeed one indication of how ingrained the exegesis has become within the form of the historical novel is the way the concept has often been subverted in recent decades as novelists have imitated the forms and styles used by historians. A prime example of such subversion occurs in Umberto Eco’s postmodern novel

⁶⁴ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 7.

⁶⁵ Hannah Kent, *Burial Rites* (London: Picador, 2014), 333–5; Robyn Cadwallader, *The Anchoress* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016), 310–12; C.J. Sansom, *Tombland* (London: Mantle, 2018), 804–66.

The Name of the Rose, which opens with a fabricated set of historical notes that frame the main narrative as a translation of a hitherto little-known historical document, for which Eco supplies an invented provenance.⁶⁶ Close mimicry of historical non-fiction works is also common in novels with a strong contrapuntal dimension, whose narratives set themselves against established accounts of events. Both Peter Carey's Booker Prize-winning *True History of the Kelly Gang* (an alternative account of Australian outlaw Ned Kelly's life) and Jonathan Carr's recent *Make Me A City* (an alternative account of the early decades of Chicago) are composed of invented sources. In Carey's novel, the narrative is divided into sections ('parcels') of uneven length, each purporting to reproduce the text of one fragment of Kelly's autobiography; each of these is prefaced by editorial notes describing the condition of the 'original' manuscripts, as if to insist upon the text's supposedly genuine provenance.⁶⁷ In Carr's novel, meanwhile, a multi-voiced narrative is bookended by 'extracts' from a fictional work of history ostensibly written in 1902, which frames the accounts of its various narrators as hitherto unseen evidence for a suppressed but nevertheless 'true' version of Chicago's origins and early history.⁶⁸ Implicit in all three of these texts is a recognition that the historical novel as it has been traditionally conceived relies, as history does, on evidence and sources. It may well be precisely because fiction set in the past has, over the years, often foregrounded its desire to reference historical evidence and sources in such a self-conscious manner – through exegesis as well as mimicry of the forms and styles of historical non-fiction works – that scholarly discussion of the genre, as Jerome de Groot points out, has similarly tended to fixate on questions of historicalness, and that readers continue to be fascinated by the 'accuracy' or 'authenticity' of their favourite novels and the 'research' that underpins them.⁶⁹ The

⁶⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1998), 1–8.

⁶⁷ Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 5, 43, 73, 123, 159, 179, 197, 221, 273, 309, 363, 383, 397.

⁶⁸ Jonathan Carr, *Make Me A City: A Novel of Chicago* (London: Scribe, 2019), 3–30, 489–98.

⁶⁹ de Groot, *Remaking History*, 3.

perennial question, ‘Where do you draw the line between fact and fiction?’ (variants of which are frequently heard at literary festivals or any time a historical novelist is interviewed about their work) in fact points to the central paradox of historical fiction, at least as it has traditionally been conceived, and to an inherent tension between two opposing forces: what we might call the historical-ethical imperative (to offer an accurate and authentic representation); and the storyteller’s imperative (to imagine). (Another source of historical *friction*.)

Exactly why novelists should feel the need to embrace the first, given its apparent incompatibility with the second, is a valid question, however. After all, to make a strong historical-ethical commitment means curbing the horizons of the imagination – placing unnecessary and even, to some degree, arbitrary constraints on the potential of fiction to envision worlds and ways of being in those worlds. Is it not in the nature of fiction to imagine what might be, what could be *if only*, what we would ideally like it to be, or what we fear it could be instead – rather than simply to attempt to describe the actuality of what is? Why should things be any different when we rephrase the above questions by changing the tense from present to past: from ‘be’ to ‘have been’, from ‘is’ to ‘was’? There is a danger, too, that in attempting to assert their historical credentials novelists risk making what creative writing theorist Jen Webb describes as an ‘illicit appeal to authority’, because their primary expertise lies not in the discipline that supplies the raw material for their writing (history), but in the practice of writing itself.⁷⁰ As John Mullan puts it, ‘The more [fiction] stacks up its evidence, its sources, its academic credentials, the more it confesses to a secondary status – something more entertaining than the truth, but something less than the truth too.’⁷¹ Counter-intuitively, perhaps, the more that fiction insists on its sense of responsibility and a commitment to historical evidence, the less convincing and more desperate for validation it begins to sound. By taking this stance, novelists risk rendering themselves subordinate to historians, and their works being regarded merely as ‘poor versions of

⁷⁰ Jen Webb, *Researching Creative Writing* (Newmarket: Frontinus, 2015), 223.

⁷¹ John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 83.

history [...] at the margins of a centrifugal historical culture', 'parasites on "proper" historical knowledge and practice.'⁷² Of course, by seeking to establish the historicalness of their works and their own scholarly credibility, novelists are arguing for the right to be taken seriously – in some ways, a natural impulse. In doing so, though, they are actually asking to be judged by the standards of a separate discipline, and thus inadvertently diminishing their own status as writers. The underlying functions and objectives of fiction and history are different, which makes it inappropriate to judge them according to the same set of values. Admittedly the distinction between the two disciplines is ill-defined and may be increasingly breaking down, as Beverley Southgate has explored in *History and Fiction*.⁷³ Many examples can be found of texts that straddle the divide – Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* (an example of New Journalism) and Binet's *HHbH* (historiographic metafiction) are but a couple. In broad terms, however, it might be said that whereas the historian seeks 'the logical, historical understanding of the probable', the novelist strives for 'an imaginative, affective experience of the possible'.⁷⁴ Historians, like mathematicians or scientists, must show their workings if they are to build a convincing argument, but for artists what matters above all is the finished piece. Fiction derives its legitimacy not from the evidence of external sources, but from the writer's technical craft (*techné*) and imaginative power (*poiesis*) to bring into being credible characters, settings, dialogues and plots.⁷⁵ Narrative plausibility and internal coherence, not historical plausibility, are paramount.

At this point it is worth noting that the historical knowledge on which novelists base their work is rather more contested and unstable than they often tend to acknowledge. Mantel's references to the 'known facts', the 'common record' and the 'common story', for example, all suggest that she subscribes to the notion

⁷² de Groot, *Remaking History*, 6.

⁷³ Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, 173–4.

⁷⁴ Emma Darwin, 'A Secret Alchemy' (PhD thesis, Goldsmiths' College, University of London, 2010), 315.

⁷⁵ On *techné* and *poiesis* see: Webb, *Researching Creative Writing*, 123.

of a fixed body of knowledge about the past to which novelists can refer and with which they engage in their fictions: a conception of history that is somewhat at odds with current historiographical thinking.⁷⁶ (When Mantel speaks of her sense of duty towards the ‘facts’, we might well ask, ‘Whose facts?’) Few professional historians in the twenty-first century would argue that historical knowledge or ‘truth’ exists in any attainable, objective, fixed, unproblematised or absolute sense.⁷⁷ Likewise, few would consider their discipline as simply concerned with collating source material, and evaluating its veracity or its validity as evidence, in order to establish the ‘facts’ of the past; rather, history is an ongoing process of analysing, interpreting and re-interpreting sources, and is thus inevitably subjective, selective, incomplete and provisional. The idea that the study of history should (or can) be neutral, objective and detached, pursued simply and purely ‘for its own sake’ – which is how many have traditionally characterised it – has been challenged by Southgate, who argues that ‘history just can’t help being *for* something [his italics]’.⁷⁸ As he points out, histories of different kinds have often served a variety of purposes, some of which have been openly professed by practitioners (e.g. to break myths, or to foster transferable skills), while others have been the product of hidden agendas (e.g. to justify a particular ideology or political status quo).⁷⁹ In fact, Southgate goes so far as to advocate a new role for history in contemporary society, arguing that historians should embrace a sense of purpose in their subject and actively present it ‘as something that might and should contribute to human betterment and hope’.⁸⁰

On a practical level as well as a philosophical one, it is difficult to conceive of a form of historical enquiry that does not involve some degree of subjective

⁷⁶ Mantel, ‘The Iron Maiden’, 8.

⁷⁷ There are notable exceptions, such as David Starkey and Mary Fulbrook: Beverley Southgate, *What Is History For?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 27–8.

⁷⁸ Southgate, *What Is History For?*, 175.

⁷⁹ Southgate, xii–xiii.

⁸⁰ Southgate, xii.

decision-making. As Richard J. Evans points out: ‘Documents can be read in a variety of ways [...] Historians are always led by their present-day concerns; the truth does not simply emerge from an unprejudiced or neutral reading of the sources, even if such a thing were possible’.⁸¹ Hayden White, meanwhile, has identified the problem in historical writing ‘of the too much and not enough’.⁸² On the one hand, historians often possess too many details to include in any given account, requiring them to make choices regarding selection (what to incorporate and what to leave out); on other occasions, the available sources provide insufficient detail, and so an element of speculation is required in order to make connections and to generate meaning from them (a particular issue when dealing with a period such as the Middle Ages).⁸³ And it is always possible, as Southgate observes, that ‘new pieces of evidence may emerge, new witnesses come forward, as a result of which perceptions of the period may be radically changed’; as a consequence, we can never attain ‘closure’ or give a ‘definitive’ account of the past.⁸⁴ For all of these reasons, the notions of objective historical ‘truth’ and of uncontested ‘facts’ about the past – against which the accuracy and authenticity of a given work of fiction can be straightforwardly and unproblematically measured – have become increasingly unsustainable. Whenever historical novelists speak of their sense of responsibility towards the past, readers are therefore entitled to ask, ‘Whose version of the past?’

Moreover, the capacity of fiction to communicate anything approaching historical knowledge is limited. How does a reader lacking any prior understanding of the subject tell whether a given piece of information is the product of the author’s imagination or the result of careful research? As Mantel puts it, ‘In any

⁸¹ Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, 2nd ed. (London: Granta, 2000), 84, 86.

⁸² Hayden White, ‘Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality’, *Rethinking History* 9, no. 2–3 (2005): 150.

⁸³ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 51.

⁸⁴ Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 178–9, 181, 196.

novel, once it's finished, you can't separate fact from fiction – it's like trying to re-turn mayonnaise to oil and egg yolk.⁸⁵ There will always be doubts regarding the veracity of *any* information expressed through the medium of fiction, simply because it is fiction. And yet it does not necessarily follow from this that the novelist should be regarded as merely a 'spinner of entertaining lies', to use Mantel's phrase, or that fiction set in the past is as a 'lying art', as per the title of an article by James Forrester.⁸⁶ According to Forrester – the novelistic alter ego of historian Ian Mortimer – all invention in historical fiction is 'lying', regardless of whether or not it is of a constructive nature or adds to the story. So long as it is intentional and purposeful, he argues, even if it 'could be called educated guesswork [...] it is still guesswork, it is still lying.'⁸⁷ In making this conflation, however, both Mantel and Forrester misconstrue not just the status of fiction but also what it means to lie. A lie, according to moral philosopher Bernard Williams, should be defined as:

an assertion, the content of which the speaker believes to be false, which is made with the intention to deceive the hearer with regard to that content. I also believe that this is what most people understand by the word 'lie' [...] It may be very uncertain, or actually indeterminate, whether the speaker really is making an assertion; whether he or she believes it is false; whether the intention is to deceive the hearer.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Mantel, 'The Day Is for the Living', 5.

⁸⁶ Mantel, 6; James Forrester, 'The Lying Art of Historical Fiction', *The Guardian*, 6 August 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/aug/06/lying-historical-fiction>.

⁸⁷ Forrester, 'Lying Art'.

⁸⁸ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 96–7.

Fiction can at times be a slippery animal; it often says what it does not mean, communicating in non-literal ways through irony and subtext. It speaks of events that have not happened and are not happening and perhaps never can happen, and people that did and do and will not exist. None of this, however, constitutes lying. The distinguishing principle is intent: as Colin Burrow points out, ‘a fiction, though it is not true, *is not intended to deceive* [my italics].’⁸⁹ When we read non-fiction – a work of history, a scientific article or a technical manual, for example – we expect to receive what the author believes to be the truth to the best of his or her knowledge, or as close to it as possible. When we read a novel, however, we freely enter into what we normally accept to be an imagined world, or an imagined version of the real world: it cannot be said in good faith that the author is attempting to deceive the reader. Writing fiction is not lying: the two concepts are categorically separate. Any ethical qualms that a novelist might have about ‘making it up’ or ‘going against known facts’ are therefore unfounded.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Colin Burrow, ‘Fiction and the Age of Lies’, *London Review of Books* 42, no. 4 (20 February 2020): 21.

⁹⁰ It is important to note at this point that my discussions of responsibility and the historical-ethical imperative primarily relate to writing the Middle Ages (as per my title) and other periods of the relatively distant past. The force of the historical-ethical imperative can vary depending on the period or subject the novelist wishes to engage with; the ethical issues associated with producing fiction set in eleventh-century England are substantially different to those associated with producing fiction about certain more recent subjects, such as the histories of slavery and empire, or the Holocaust, all of which continue to exert political pressure in our own time. Abrogating historical-ethical responsibility with regard to such subjects – which might be seen as distorting or even denying the lived experiences of historical persons – risks misrepresenting the victims of oppression in a manner that might cause offence or distress to those presently living. Writing ethically about such subjects might therefore require the novelist to proceed with greater caution (and with fewer liberties) than I have taken with respect to the events and individuals on which and whom *Flight* is based. A detailed analysis of the ethical issues associated with fictionalising politically sensitive subjects in more recent history is beyond the scope of this thesis, but see, for example, Maria Margaronis’s comparison of the contrasting approaches taken by Ian McEwan in *Atonement* and Toni Morrison in *Beloved*: Maria Margaronis, ‘The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing

The natural counter-argument might be that, while novelists are of course free to disregard or contradict the historical record if they wish, they cannot in that case claim to be writing *historical* fiction. As Mantel warns: 'If you regard [evidence] as something that gets in the way, or as something for you to chew up and consume uncritically, your novel will be unhistorical'.⁹¹ On the other hand, can any fiction ever be truly and purely 'historical'? As the previous chapter demonstrated, a text's approach to the past is invariably inflected and complicated by the writer's creative philosophies and use of different modes. Moreover, every text is always rooted to some degree in the social environment of its author, influenced by the culture it has grown out of and is intended to contribute to, and informed by present-day preoccupations. In Margaret Atwood's words:

We have to write out of who and where and when we are,
whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may. [...] We
can't help but be modern, just as the Victorian writers – when-
ever they set their books – couldn't help but be Victorian. Like
all beings alive on Middle Earth, we're trapped by time and cir-
cumstance.⁹²

In rendering our visions of the past we write to a greater or lesser degree in modern styles and put modern words and phrases into the mouths of our characters. Anachronism is to some extent inevitable, and to claim otherwise is disingenuous. A text's commitment to historicalness can, even with an author's best intentions and despite what claims they might make, only ever be partial at best. The closer we examine the concept, the less historical 'historical fiction' seems.

Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century', *History Workshop Journal* 65 (Spring 2008): 138–60.

⁹¹ Mantel, 'The Iron Maiden', 5.

⁹² Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction', *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (December 1998): 1504.

A partial (or selective) commitment to historicalness of a different kind is exhibited by *Flight*, complicated by the fact that it does not make any explicit claim to belong to a specific historical context. Although it is inspired by certain real events that took place in 1015 at Malmesbury, there is no mention of either the year or the location in the text itself; I have actively avoided making overt reference to its precise setting. References to political events, locations elsewhere, or any other signifiers that might fix the narrative more precisely either geographically or chronologically are absent or obscured, and the scope of the narrative hardly ever extends beyond the walls of the abbey – and then only briefly, primarily in flashbacks and memories. The only named characters who have historical counterparts are Eilmer and Siferth. The reigning king, Æthelred II, is never named; his son, the *atheling* Edmund, is present in the narrative but identified only as ‘the serpent’, and no indication is given of his royal rank. Even the narrator never explicitly identifies herself – although her description of the forms of the letters that make up her name as she writes them in the abbey’s *liber vitae*, and her off-handed reference to an ‘old battle’ (a modern English rendering of the elements of her name, *eald-* and *-gyp*) provide coded clues (189).⁹³ The monks’ Old English names offer a hint that the novel is set in pre-Conquest England, while occasional references to the approaching ‘heathen’ army might further narrow down the period to the Viking Age. However, in the absence of any paratextual information (or any prior knowledge about the two episodes upon which the novel is based) I imagine readers would find it difficult to pinpoint the narrative’s historical position any more precisely.

In this regard *Flight* follows the example set by William Golding’s *The Spire*, a novel that acted as an important early influence. Set at an unspecified point during the Middle Ages, *The Spire* concerns the construction of a cathedral spire under the direction of the fictional Dean Jocelin. The location of the cathedral is commonly regarded to be Salisbury, where Golding taught for many years at Bishop Wordsworth’s School; elsewhere he writes admiringly about Salisbury Cathedral

⁹³ On the name elements *eald-* and *-gyp*: Elisabeth Okasha, *Women’s Names in Old English* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 58, 64, 70.

and its spire.⁹⁴ And yet while the mention of various other places implies a location somewhere in South Wiltshire, Salisbury itself is never named in the text. As John Mullan says in his introduction to the 2013 edition of the novel: ‘The cathedral in *The Spire* is Salisbury Cathedral, and it is not.’⁹⁵ Much the same can be said of the monastery in *Flight*: it is both Malmesbury Abbey and not; in one sense it is precisely situated, but in another it is entirely off the map. It constitutes its own self-contained sphere of activity, detached from a concrete setting. Like the fictional town of Macondo in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it might be regarded as ‘not so much a place as a state of mind’.⁹⁶ Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the monastery in my novel is *both* a mappable location *and* a state of mind. It resembles what Margaret Atwood terms a ‘ustopia’ (her word for a utopia that contains a hidden dystopia, or vice versa), a not-exactly place that exists ‘anywhere but nowhere’.⁹⁷ In Golding’s novel, as in my own, no dates are provided, there are very few references to events or individuals beyond the immediate setting that might help locate the novel in time, and just as the majority of my characters have no counterparts in recorded history, neither does Dean Jocelin. The aim of this strategy in *The Spire*, Mullan suggests, is ‘to give no hint of historical tourism and no encouragement to check his fiction against the facts. As always, Golding intends his particular drama to be universal.’⁹⁸ In a similar way, evading the question of the precise context of *Flight* allows me to sidestep some historical uncertainties, such as the date of the real-life Eilmer’s birth. As I discuss in the Appendix, the general consensus among scholars is that he was born in the 980s, but it is quite possible that he was not born until as late as the 1010s, which, if true, would simply render impossible the scenario I have imagined

⁹⁴ William Golding, *A Moving Target* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 17, 164–7.

⁹⁵ William Golding, *The Spire* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013), viii.

⁹⁶ Gabriel García Márquez, quoted in María Alonso Alonso, *Diasporic Marvellous Realism: History, Identity, and Memory in Caribbean Fiction* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 18.

⁹⁷ Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (London: Virago, 2012), 74–5.

⁹⁸ Golding, *The Spire*, viii.

in the novel. Because the text does not commit to an explicit date, however, and because it obscures the identities of many of the real-life individuals it features, it discourages a reading that focuses too closely on events, chronology and biography.

Indeed, this sort of reading would reveal a novel that is not overly concerned with what is popularly termed ‘historical accuracy’, by which I mean fidelity to historical events and biographies. It plays loose with the chronology of the year 1015, when it is notionally set. Whereas in real-life the raiding-army led by Cnut didn’t reach English shores until sometime in late summer or early autumn, in the novel what is nebulously referred to as the ‘heathen army’ already appears to be posing a tangible threat in the spring and early summer (22–3, 93, 166).⁹⁹ The novel takes liberties with the biographies of the individuals concerned, so far as these can be reconstructed. Nowhere in the sources is it suggested that there was any romantic affiliation between Ealdgyth and the *ætheling* Edmund before she arrived at Malmesbury, or that her husband, Siferth, was a crypto-pagan, or that she was imprisoned because of suspicions regarding her own faith: these are all inventions on my part. At the same time, *Flight* omits critical elements of what little we know historically of Ealdgyth’s and Eilmer’s lives. William of Malmesbury tells us that the historical Eilmer ‘used to give as a reason for his fall, that he forgot to fit a tail on his hinder parts’.¹⁰⁰ This reasoning does not figure at all in the novel, in which Eilmer attributes his failure instead to having too little faith in himself (253) – which paints an entirely different picture of his character to that suggested by the primary source material. Similarly, Ealdgyth’s implied fate in the novel does not match what we are told by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In fact, by appearing to show her escaping the *ætheling* Edmund’s clutches, either by achieving flight or by falling to her death (268), it rejects and rewrites the Chronicle’s account, which tells us that Edmund took her from Malmesbury and ‘had her for wife’.¹⁰¹ My

⁹⁹ ASC E *s.a.* 1015: Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 146.

¹⁰⁰ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:415.

¹⁰¹ ASC E *s.a.* 1015: Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 146.

depictions of Eilmer and Ealdgyth in the novel are thus not entirely faithful to the originals. All historical fiction, of course, is selective regarding what information it includes and what it omits. In the case of *Flight*, however, these creative choices indicate a novel that is not content merely to interpolate (by working in what Mantel calls the ‘gaps and inconsistencies’, the ‘cracks and fissures’), nor even to speculate (by making wholesale inventions), but actually to revise the accounts derived from the primary sources. The events and characters featured in my novel might have been originally inspired by historical counterparts, but their representations are, if not exactly unhistorical, then only partially historical – and even, in the specific instances I have just detailed, *anti*-historical (in the sense that they belong to what, it could be argued, is an alternate timeline).

In one sense *Flight* is thus fixed only notionally in Malmesbury in the year 1015. But even though it does not overtly claim to belong to that historical context, and does not strive to be ‘accurate’ in the sense defined above, it nevertheless displays a deep concern for historical authenticity, which is to say that it is sensitive towards what, as a result of my own original research and my wider reading about the period, I understand to be the social, religious, intellectual and material conditions of early eleventh-century England.¹⁰² These conditions encompass – but are not limited to – monastic culture, medicine, horticulture, theology, cosmology, portents, dreams and dream-prognostication, architecture and material culture. A wealth of knowledge accumulated over several years has contributed to the novel. For the reasons I gave earlier, it is not my intention to turn this chapter into an extended ‘historical note’ in which I attempt to demonstrate the extent and depth of the knowledge underlying my work. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile briefly drawing attention to a few specific instances where details drawn from primary sources have directly informed the novel. When Eilmer cautions Ealdgyth against reading too much into her dreams of her dead husband (57–8), he is making

¹⁰² I presented some of this original research, specifically into early medieval astronomy, at the 2019 conference of the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

reference to Ælfric of Eynsham's *Life* of St Swithun, which is thought to date to the last decade of the tenth century:

Now it should be understood that we ought not to put too much store by dreams, because they are not all from God [...] some are from the devil, intended as a sort of deception whereby he may bring the soul to disaster [...] The dreams which come from God are delightful; and those which come from the devil are terrifying; and God himself forbade that we pay heed to dreams, lest the devil might delude us.¹⁰³

Similarly, the 'sleep-drink' that Eilmer prepares at various points during the novel (73, 248) – containing henbane, hemlock and wormwood – is inspired by entry LXII in the *Lacnunga*, a collection of herbal recipes, prayers and blessings also dating to c.1000.¹⁰⁴ When the infirmarian Herebald states that there are 28 known recipes 'for eruptions of the skin, for blisters and sores and rashes and swellings' (132), he is making direct reference to a passage in entry LXXXVII.¹⁰⁵ The poultice on Pybba's hand, comprising cattle-dung and beet leaves (133), combines ingredients listed in entries XCIV and XCV.¹⁰⁶ The hand-signals used by the monks (156–7, 213) – for a candle, for a request to sit down, for food, for tiredness, and for a woman – are drawn from items 27, 38, 49, 89 and 127 respectively of the *Monasteriales Indicia*, an Old English text from the mid-eleventh century that

¹⁰³ Michael Lapidge, ed., *The Cult of St Swithun*, Winchester Studies, 4.ii (Oxford: Clarendon Press, for the Winchester Excavations Committee, 2003), 577, 604–5.

¹⁰⁴ Edward Pettit, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: The Lacnunga*, trans. Edward Pettit, vol. 1 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001), xxvii, 30–1; Edward Pettit, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms, and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585: The Lacnunga*, trans. Edward Pettit, vol. 2 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001), 60–1.

¹⁰⁵ Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies*, 2001, 1:74–5; Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies*, 2001, 2:197.

¹⁰⁶ Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies*, 2001, 1:76–7.

describes a system of sign language that was probably (but not certainly) used in English monasteries during those hours when the Benedictine Rule forbade monks to speak.¹⁰⁷

These are just a handful of examples; there are many others I could have chosen. Such details are not merely decorative and surface-level; they are substantive and of critical importance in narrative terms. They shape the contours of the novel and delimit the environment (physical, material, social, intellectual, botanical, pharmacological etc.) within which the characters move, think, act and interact. Indeed, a large portion of the plot revolves around the interpretation of various fantastic occurrences – Eilmer’s flight, Pybba’s recovery, extreme weather events – within an intellectual and theological framework specific to this period. It simply would not work, at least not as effectively or in the same manner, if it were set in any other place or at any other time. Details like the ones I have outlined above have several functions. They are, to borrow the terms used by the critic James Wood, what ‘ground’ my account and give it ‘thisness’.¹⁰⁸ Details, according to Francine Prose, are ‘what persuade us that someone is telling the truth’.¹⁰⁹ They are essential to what Hilary Mantel calls the ‘real job’ of the novelist: ‘to recreate the texture of lived experience: to activate the senses, and to deepen the reader’s engagement through feeling.’¹¹⁰ They constitute what the first-century rhetorician Quintillian terms *evidentia*: not ‘evidence’ in our modern sense but rather ‘vividness’; splashes of colour intended to convince one’s audience through eliciting an emotional response.¹¹¹ They make the fictional world plausible and tangible, and thus convince the reader to believe in it. Each individual piece of information

¹⁰⁷ Debby Banham, ed., *Monasteriales Indicia: The Anglo-Saxon Monastic Sign Language*, trans. Debby Banham (Little Downham: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1996), 7, 14, 31, 33, 35, 41, 43, 49.

¹⁰⁸ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2009), 56–7.

¹⁰⁹ Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them* (London: Union Books, 2012), 196.

¹¹⁰ Mantel, ‘Can These Bones Live?’, 3.

¹¹¹ Burrow, ‘Fiction and the Age of Lies’, 21.

might seem trivial. Collectively, however, they contribute towards the construction of an environment that is alien to the twenty-first-century reader. It is by including these details as part of a narrative strategy of persuasion that writers encode the texture of history into fiction. If I didn't consider this authentic texture essential – if I didn't imagine my novel as situated to some degree in a particular time and place – then I could have elected not to include these pieces of information, or else have made up something entirely fictitious to go in their place.

What these details demonstrate is that, while in one sense *Flight* only notionally belongs to a historical time and place, in other regards a feeling of historical authenticity is nevertheless carefully encoded into the novel. It does not explicitly declare where and when it is set and so makes no claim to belong to a specific historical context, nor is it not overly concerned with fidelity to chronology, events and individual biographies (what is commonly referred to as 'historical accuracy'). Nevertheless, it is concerned with communicating, through the deployment of period-appropriate detail, an authentic sense of early eleventh-century England. In this way, by adhering only selectively to what I have termed the historical-ethical imperative, the novel positions itself in a past that is neither exactly mythic nor entirely historical, but which oscillates between the two states. In one sense it belongs to a particular moment in the past, and yet in another sense it asserts its existence independently of any historical referential framework. In other words, it has one foot in history and one foot outside of it. This oscillation between the mythic and the historical is, I suggest, what permits (a) the narrative's divergence from real-life events, biography and chronology; and (b) the introduction, in the manner of a fable, of some of the novel's more marvellous-seeming elements, such as the defoliation of the landscape towards the end (about which I will say more in Chapter 3). It is certainly difficult to argue that the narrative of *Flight* is 'grounded in a keen awareness of history as event' – one of the defining characteristics of the historical mood of the twenty-first century, according to Boxall.¹¹² Owing to its oscillation between the mythic and the historical, *Flight*

¹¹² Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 41.

relinquishes its claim to represent a faithful version of events. The novel's primary duties are to story and to character rather than to history, and it is for this reason – rather than merely due to a cavalier attitude towards the sources – that it contains untruths and at times goes against the historical record. It asks to be judged not by its representation of a real time and place, but on its own terms as a narrative. Several times during Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* – a magical realist novel set during the Napoleonic Wars – one of her two narrators, Henri, addresses the reader directly, saying: 'I'm telling you stories. Trust me.'¹¹³ In a similar though less direct way, *Flight* asks its readers to trust in its account of events, without worrying about whether in fact they actually happened; the novel does not attempt to claim legitimacy by virtue of any extratextual frame of reference.

Nevertheless, one trait that my novel shares with *Wolf Hall* – and with Binet's *HHbH* – is a desire to find a means of enacting through literature what Southgate terms 'living positively with uncertainty'.¹¹⁴ Both Mantel and Binet in their different ways respond to the postmodern challenge by striving for the reclamation and reconstruction of a concrete sense of the past, while acknowledging (implicitly in the case of *Wolf Hall*, overtly in that of *HHbH*) the difficulties of doing so due to the past's inherent slipperiness and indeterminacy. The strategy I have adopted is more or less the inverse. *Flight* embraces the indeterminacy and perhaps irrecoverable nature of the past, takes these as central themes, and imagines a world in which objective, logical, rational certainty is difficult to come by and, as the very first sentence of the novel declares, 'Faith is everything' (2). The meaning of events is almost always contested and provisional. Characters do their best to make sense of events unfolding around them, albeit not always successfully, and are frequently forced to confront their shortcomings in this regard. Even the cycles and rhythms of the natural environment cannot be relied upon. In this way, the novel foregrounds a sense of the uncertain, shady, hard-to-access past, and capitalises on what is a relatively sparse evidential base – as detailed in

¹¹³ Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (London: Vintage, 2014), 5 and *passim*.

¹¹⁴ Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, 197.

the Appendix – to conjure up an unabashedly imaginative flight of fancy (no pun intended). Contrary to Mantel’s advice, it makes things up, speculates rather than interpolates, knowingly goes against what the sources tell us, and even distorts chronology and biography in ways that are convenient to make the story more dramatic. It does not seek the reconstruction of a concrete past; nevertheless, by establishing a ‘sandbox’-like setting in which the repercussions of fantastic events in a specific cultural environment can be explored, it attempts to evoke a *feeling* of eleventh-century England, and to pass on an affective appreciation of the period (what it might have felt like had the events I describe actually occurred). *Flight* might not be historically accurate, but that is not to say it is not historically aware and committed.

Both of these strategies for ‘living positively with uncertainty’ represent different means by which, as writers and as human beings, we attempt to reconcile ourselves with the idea of an indeterminate and perhaps unreachable past, and so to ground ourselves in the present: to orient ourselves, understand where we have come from and how we got here. For it is important to stress that when we write about the past we are always writing, to a greater or lesser extent, about the present as well: writing about ourselves, our wants and fears, our strengths and our failings; writing to make sense of both the world we have inherited and the world around us. One hazard of the ongoing popular and critical fascination with historicalness is that we overlook the fact that the stories we tell about the past are never solely, as Margaret Atwood points out, ‘about this or that slice of the past, or this or that political or social event, or this or that city or country or nationality’. They may very well be about those things, she argues, but at the same time:

They are about human nature, which usually means they are about pride, envy, avarice, lust, sloth, gluttony, and anger. They are about truth and lies, and disguises and revelations; they are about crime and punishment; they are about love and forgiveness

and long suffering and charity; they are about sin and retribution and sometimes even redemption.¹¹⁵

This universal quality of fiction, whenever it happens to be set, is perhaps what Jenny Bavidge has in mind when she expresses her hesitation about categorising Mantel's Cromwell novels as “‘merely’ historical”, and what Diarmaid MacCulloch means when he says that to call them historical novels does them an ‘injustice’.¹¹⁶ Implicit in their remarks is a recognition that the best fiction does not just tell us something about the world of its subject, but also speaks to the world of the reader.

This, I argue, is one of the challenges facing historical fiction in the twenty-first century: not only to appreciate and engage with the past (as complex and multifaceted as it is) on its own terms but also – and arguably more importantly – to engage with it actively on *our* terms; to present it in ways that are relevant to our own society. (‘The past belongs to us,’ Atwood asserts, ‘because we are the ones who need it.’)¹¹⁷ In order to do this, fiction should not limit itself according to arbitrary rules, but instead should have the freedom and confidence to use the full complement of technical and imaginative tools at its disposal to find new formal and stylistic ways of depicting the past, new voices, and new modes (in the Eagletonian sense) that are not subordinate to a purely historical, evidence-based reading of the past, but which complement, complicate and challenge it. In this way fiction can establish a sense of its own legitimacy that is distinct from, and not dependent on, the discipline of history. Fiction, according to Jacques Derrida, ‘gives in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules’.¹¹⁸ There are, says Robert Eaglestone, ‘no limits in what it can say’: its ‘unbound freedom’

¹¹⁵ Atwood, ‘In Search of Alias Grace’, 1516.

¹¹⁶ Bavidge, ‘Hilary Mantel’, 416; MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell*, 1.

¹¹⁷ Atwood, ‘In Search of Alias Grace’, 1516.

¹¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, quoted in Robert Eaglestone, *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

means that it ‘can be about anything, and can take any form or forms that it chooses [...] go absolutely anywhere or do anything’.¹¹⁹ This freedom is the life-blood of fiction: it is what makes it different from other forms of prose writing. In the third and final chapter I examine in greater depth how my own novel’s use of fantastic elements addresses the challenges I have set out above and points towards an alternative model for the imaginative exploration of the past.

¹¹⁹ Eaglestone, 2–3.



5. West front of the south aisle, Malmesbury Abbey. The late medieval west tower no longer stands. The precise location of the early medieval abbey buildings, including the tower from which Eilmer attempted his flight, is unknown.

Chapter 3: The future of the past in fiction

For the reasons set out in the previous chapter, historical fiction in the twenty-first century might be said to be experiencing something of an identity crisis, in spite of its continuing commercial success and the critical attention it has received in recent years – or perhaps as a consequence of that attention. This crisis is brought about by the paradox that lies at its heart. It is a form at war with itself, pulled in opposing directions: on the one hand, by the historical-ethical imperative (to offer an accurate and authentic representation) that its practitioners have traditionally taken upon themselves; and, on the other hand, by the storyteller's imperative (to imagine) that is common to all genres and forms of fiction. As we have seen, due to its reliance on various 'modes' of pastness, what we have come to call 'historical fiction' cannot claim to represent visions of the past that are strictly historical in nature. And yet, so long as it affirms its sense of responsibility towards the past, its capabilities as fiction are necessarily constrained.

How do we escape this paradox? At the end of the previous chapter I outlined a few of the key challenges I believe the genre currently faces: to address the concerns of the present as well as those of the past; to seek out innovative ways of depicting the past that are not constrained by a sense of historical-ethical responsibility; and to free itself from a sense of dependence on the discipline of history, its forms and its practices in order to justify its existence and its value. In this chapter I explore in practical terms one of the ways in which, going forward, these challenges might be addressed, with particular reference to the narrative strategies I have employed in *Flight*. Historical fiction by its very nature seeks inspiration from the past, and it is surely no accident that various studies of the genre have found it useful to do the same, firstly by locating the origins of the historical novel in early

nineteenth-century literature and then examining its subsequent evolution.¹²⁰ Defining the historical novel with reference to the genre's own history is undoubtedly a natural and instinctive reflex. Given that the focus of this commentary is historical fiction as it stands today, however, it seems equally instructive to consider the genre not simply in terms of where it has come from, but also in terms of the directions in which it is headed. In this chapter, therefore, I look to the future. Having so far in this commentary examined what historical fiction is (in the sense of how it is constructed) and what it is *for* (its objectives and responsibilities), I now pose the question, 'Where is historical fiction in the twenty-first century going?' It is clearly impossible for me to attempt, in what remains of this short commentary, anything like an exhaustive examination of the various avenues available to the historical novelist that offer potential for exploration. Instead, I focus on one particular avenue that I believe: (a) has particular potential to reappraise, re-envision and reimagine the past in order to speak to the present; (b) makes full use of the imaginative toolkit at the fiction-writer's disposal; and (c) allows the novel to reclaim a sense of its own legitimacy.

So far in this critical commentary I have barely touched upon what many readers might consider to be one of the most prominent and defining features of *Flight*: its inclusion of phenomena that either appear to be supernatural in nature or else border on the supernatural – phenomena which, to borrow the terminology used by Tzvetan Todorov, can be classified as 'fantastic'. In this chapter I examine the nature of these fantastic elements and the functions they serve, firstly in narrative terms and secondly with regard to how they shape the novel's relationship to history. In what ways can the fantastic be used to destabilise our perception of the past, and reinforce its 'otherness'? How might it generate alternative kinds of understanding of the past while also speaking to the concerns of the present and our fears about the future? Whereas in the previous two chapters I have often compared and contrasted my own creative strategies with those of other

¹²⁰ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, 11–50; Darwin, 'A Secret Alchemy', 267; Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Mitchell, Stanley (London: Merlin Press, 1989), 19–88.

novelists, in this chapter I focus in much greater depth on my own creative practice and the particular intervention *Flight* aims to make in the genre that we call historical fiction. I argue that the integration of fantastic elements into historical fiction is a particularly appropriate strategy for responding to the postmodern challenge: a strategy by which novelists in the twenty-first century can reimagine the past in ways that are both innovative and relevant to the present.

The fantastic phenomena featured in *Flight* are numerous, take various forms, and acquire greater significance as the novel progresses. They include: paranormal incidents experienced only by Ealdgyth (a cut that bleeds when she approaches the rood, dream-visions of her dead husband, disembodied voices that only she can hear, the pain and light she experiences during the apparent miracle in the infirmary); natural and meteorological phenomena (a dead kite that appears to have been struck down mid-flight, a beetle with strange markings, the unidentified stinging weed that injures Pybba, sudden and heavy snowfall in May, hailstones of freakish size and appearance, the premature shedding of leaves by the trees in the monastery and beyond); Eilmer's peculiar physical traits and idiosyncrasies of character (his gold-coloured irises, the scars on his shoulderblades, his remarkable facility as a youth for scholarly pursuits, his apparent ability to consume quantities of wormwood and hemlock that to others would be highly toxic); and the seemingly miraculous (Pybba's remarkable recovery from illness as a consequence of Ealdgyth's healing touch). Of these various phenomena, some are incidental to the plot while others are more integral. The apparent miracle in the infirmary (136–8) has particular significance; a defining moment of the novel, it occurs at almost exactly the halfway stage, at what some writers refer to as the Midpoint Reversal, which involves both a turning-point in the plot and a significant raising of the dramatic stakes.¹²¹

¹²¹ Screenwriter Charles Harris does not use the specific term 'Midpoint Reversal', but he describes the characteristics of this phase of the narrative and supplies a helpful diagram: Charles Harris, *Complete Screenwriting Course* (London: John Murray Learning, 2014), 82–3.

Before examining the ways in which these various phenomena inflect and complicate *Flight's* relationship with the past, it is important to understand their place and function within the novel in a broader narrative sense. In the previous chapter I argued that the presence of these fantastic elements is permitted in the first place by the novel's oscillation between the mythic and the historical. By absolving itself of a responsibility towards historical accuracy, the novel opens up an imaginative space in which a series of entirely invented and improbable events lacking any basis in the historical sources are able to take place. At this point it is worth noting that, although I use the term 'fantastic' here in more or less the sense defined by Todorov, I nevertheless have some caveats regarding its application to my novel, which I shall discuss shortly. Todorov outlines three general categories by which seemingly supernatural events in fiction can be classified: (a) the uncanny; (b) its antithesis, the marvellous; and (c) the fantastic itself. The first of these, the uncanny, which can be summarised as 'the supernatural explained', describes a phenomenon that might at first appear to be impossible within the laws of nature but for which in fact there exists a mundane explanation – or which can be rationalised in some other way, for example by dismissing it as a dream or an illusion of the senses.¹²² The second category, the marvellous, or 'the supernatural accepted', describes a phenomenon for which no mundane explanation is possible: it becomes clear that something truly outside the laws of nature has occurred.¹²³ The third category, the fantastic, is a state of ambiguity or uncertainty brought about by having to decide between uncanny and marvellous interpretations: in Todorov's words, it is the 'hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event'.¹²⁴ This hesitation takes place primarily in the mind of the reader, Todorov stresses, although he notes that it is sometimes also (but does not have to be) expressed through the

¹²² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 41.

¹²³ Todorov, 41–2.

¹²⁴ Todorov, 25.

reactions of a character, or characters, in the text.¹²⁵ A fantastic event is one for which both marvellous and mundane explanations can be entertained, such that it is impossible to determine conclusively exactly what has happened. This particular characteristic of the fantastic is what distinguishes it from magical realism, a closely related mode with which it should not be confused.

In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a matter-of-fact manner by the magical realist.¹²⁶

In magical realism, what might otherwise appear to be extraordinary, supernatural events are generally considered unremarkable by the narrator and the other characters who witness them. The magical and the divine are reduced to the level of the mundane: they become ‘ordinary events in a realist story’ and are ‘accepted as a part of material reality’.¹²⁷ In *Flight*, however, the opposite is true. Supernatural-seeming events are far from unremarkable: in fact, they provoke constant debate and disagreement among the characters who witness them. For these reasons, the term ‘fantastic’ (rather than ‘magical realist’) is more appropriate for describing the various supernatural and quasi-supernatural phenomena depicted in *Flight*.

That said, the system Todorov proposes is not perfect, nor does it map clearly on to the fictional world depicted in *Flight*. One of the problems with his system is its reliance on generalised assumptions about the reading experience. The degree of hesitation generated by the text cannot be easily predicted but

¹²⁵ Todorov, 31.

¹²⁶ Amaryll Chanady, quoted in Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 25.

¹²⁷ Bowers, 24.

rather, I would argue, is dependent on the individual reader – on his or her expectations, openness to supernatural modes of thinking in both the real and fictional worlds, and willingness to suspend disbelief. A sufficiently sceptical reader might attempt to rationalise almost any phenomenon, as one particular episode from *Flight* can be used to illustrate. Towards the end of the novel, the leaves begin to fall from all the trees in the monastery (216–19), an event that would not normally be shocking except that in this case it takes place not in autumn but in early summer. Of all the extraordinary phenomena described in the novel, this is perhaps the best candidate to be classed, under Todorov’s system, as marvellous rather than fantastic, on the basis that it is almost impossible to conceive of any mundane explanation for it – and yet even in this case it is difficult to rule one out completely. One might conclude (although I believe it would be a stretch) that the trees have succumbed to some sort of unusual and yet entirely natural blight that is beyond the power of the monks to diagnose. Alternatively, one might choose to believe that the premature leaf-shedding is a symptom of the climatic disruption witnessed earlier in the novel in the form of the late snowfall and severe hail-storm.¹²⁸ Thirdly, one might dismiss Ealdgyth’s experiences at this point as mere fantasies, or argue that, for whatever reason, she is no longer being honest or reliable in her narration. This possibility might well be unsatisfying in narrative terms (as in the case of the well-worn ‘it was all just a dream’ trope) but it can never be fully discounted. Much of the narrative tension that underpins Umberto Eco’s *Baudolino*, for example, derives from its eponymous hero’s innate unreliability as a storyteller, to which attention is drawn early in the novel.¹²⁹ Baudolino’s tale, which is set in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, features a wide variety of marvels, including semi-human races such as skiapods, blemmyae and

¹²⁸ Trees might prematurely shed their leaves for a number of reasons, including: low temperatures (below 5°C); lack of water; ‘extreme environmental conditions’ such as volcanic dust, bad ground frost and storms; and climate change: Alok Jha, ‘Why are trees losing their leaves so early this year?’, *The Guardian*, 28 August 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2003/aug/28/thisweekssciencequestions>.

¹²⁹ Umberto Eco, *Baudolino*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 2003), 43.

cynocephali, a river of stone (the Sambatyon) that flows for six days out of every seven, a forest of impenetrable darkness, and encounters with monsters such as the basilisk, harpies and rocs. Whether or not we believe in the creatures and phenomena Baudolino describes, however, is less a question of whether we believe they have a mundane or a marvellous cause, and more to do with whether we trust the narrator himself – whose testimony is called into question from the beginning – and thus believe in their existence at all. Similar questions of narratorial reliability can be asked of Ealdgyth in *Flight*. Occasionally she offers the reader candid and telling flashes of insight into her psyche (e.g. 33: ‘Sometimes I lie in the dark and imagine I am dying’), but for much of the novel her narration is rather more guarded and detached, in the manner of someone who has recently suffered and is trying to repress a significant trauma. Together with her frequent temporal elisions, these fluctuations between openness and reticence (which can also be thought of in terms of point of view, as modulations of narrative distance) indicate a certain selectivity in what, and how much, she tells the reader. An element of doubt is therefore necessarily raised concerning her testimony. The reader is led to wonder: what is she not telling us? How much of what she does tell us can we trust? Could it be that some of the fantastic events she describes are merely delusions brought about by the psychological trauma she has experienced? If so, this casts an entirely different light on the events of the novel and Ealdgyth’s ability to convey a reliable account of them. For all of these reasons it is difficult to reject conclusively the possibility of a mundane explanation for any event that the reader might otherwise be tempted to class as marvellous.

Similarly it is difficult, within the terms of the fictional world outlined in *Flight*, to rule out the possibility of a marvellous explanation for events that might otherwise seem merely uncanny. In this world, even the mundane is imbued with divine force – or so at least Eilmer would have us believe. ‘The wonders we call miracles are all around us,’ he explains. ‘All we have to do is open our eyes.’

[...] I think of the many mornings I have risen with the dawn
and seen the sunlight spill across the fields and the whole world

turn to gold. That, to my mind, is a miracle. When a tree afflicted with blight is cut down and you find amidst the rot that it is overrunning with beetles and earwigs and many-feet: that, too, is a miracle. The changing of the moon, the sprouting of the barley, the budding in the hedgerows, the blooming along the riverbanks: all these things are miracles, and we give them this name because they excite in us feelings of admiration, of wonder.

Eilmer goes on to add, '[T]here is another, deeper name that we give to these things. [...] That name is God' (62–3). As far as he is concerned, the supernatural can and should be read as an extension of the ordinary world – above (*supra*) but not in opposition to the natural order of things (*naturam*). This holistic world-view is, incidentally, another example of the sort of authentic detail I mentioned in Chapter 2, since it represents a theological stance appropriate to the early Middle Ages. As Sarah Foot points out, during this period 'it was not possible to separate natural phenomena, governed by physical and natural laws, from mystical or supernatural phenomena which defied rational explanation'; all were considered to be governed by God.¹³⁰ Although Ealdgyth's religious position is less clear than Eilmer's, she nevertheless exhibits some sympathies towards this world-view. Not only is she susceptible to paranormal experiences such as the ones I have mentioned above, but she, too, is capable in her own way of seeing wonder in the everyday (29: 'I trace my hands over the wall, over the yellow moss bursting from the cracks. Press my cheek against the stonework. If I wait long enough, hold my breath and do not move, maybe I will hear it grow'). Seen through the eyes of the novel's two main characters, every mundane occurrence can be regarded as also possessing a supernatural aspect, and vice versa. In the world described by Eilmer – which Ealdgyth and consequently the reader are invited to enter into – an event

¹³⁰ Sarah Foot, 'Plenty, Portents and Plague: Ecclesiastical Readings of the Natural World in Early Medieval Europe', in *God's Bounty?: The Churches and the Natural World*, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon, Studies in Church History 46 (Woodbridge: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by the Boydell Press, 2010, 2010), 16–17.

can be uncanny and marvellous *at the same time*. Rather than standing in opposition to one another, the two states co-exist. As in Todorov's definition of the fantastic, mundane and supernatural interpretations may be entertained simultaneously. However, since the text encourages the reader to regard the distinction between the two states as unnecessary and meaningless, the hesitation it seeks to generate is of a subtly different kind to that which Todorov envisages.

With these caveats in mind, for the rest of this chapter I will nevertheless – for the sake of simplicity and lack of a more convenient term – continue to use the term 'fantastic' to refer to the full range of supernatural and quasi-supernatural events that feature in the novel. These fantastic elements serve a number of important narrative functions, as Todorov explains. First of all, they elicit an emotional response in the characters who witness them – and in the reader in turn.¹³¹ Depending on their exact nature and context, they might seek either to unsettle and instil a feeling of dread (as with the various natural and meteorological phenomena I have described), or else to inspire wonder and curiosity – or even, in some cases, to do both at the same time (as with the apparent miracle in the infirmary that marks the Midpoint Reversal). Secondly, fantastic elements assist in generating suspense. Todorov does not elaborate on what he means by his assertion that 'the presence of fantastic elements permits a particularly dense organization of the plot'.¹³² Nevertheless, it is clear that by calling into question the stability of the fictional world's laws, a new realm of possibilities within that world are opened up. In order to establish suspense, a story must essentially raise two types of question: one concerning temporality (which might be expressed in terms as simple as 'what happens next?') and the other concerning causality (a common example being 'whodunnit?').¹³³ Fantastic elements raise both types of question by enlarging the possibilities not just of *what* might occur in the narrative going forward (temporality), but also *the means by which* those events might occur (causality).

¹³¹ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 92.

¹³² Todorov, 92.

¹³³ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), 14.

A third narrative function of the fantastic – and perhaps the most fundamental as far as *Flight* is concerned – relates to the hesitation that Todorov identifies. Essentially, the fantastic confronts the reader with a dilemma: to believe or not to believe.¹³⁴ This tension between faith and scepticism is, as I have pointed out previously, a central concern of my novel. By repeatedly confronting the reader with such dilemmas through a concatenation of improbable events, the novel invites the reader to entertain and hold in his or her head two increasingly divergent narratives: one founded upon faith and the other upon scepticism. This divergence is cemented by the novel's conclusion (268), which does not provide complete narrative closure but instead hints at two possible outcomes. In the first, the laws of nature are disrupted and Ealdgyth achieves the power of flight; in the second, the laws of nature are maintained and she falls to her death. The novel ends before this divergence can be resolved, with Ealdgyth poised on the edge of the bell-tower roof, the action suspended in the very moment that she begins to fall. The final sentence ('And it is the easiest thing in the world') can be read either as uplifting or as tragic depending on one's interpretation. The two outcomes are superimposed upon one another, much as the cat in Erwin Schrödinger's famous thought-experiment is considered both dead and alive at the same time.¹³⁵ In effect, two parallel worlds or alternative realities are brought into being. It is worth pointing out that, at the point at which the novel ends, no fantastic event in the Todorovian sense has actually (yet) taken place. The hesitation between these outcomes occurs is only made possible because the fantastic events seeded throughout the novel have, by calling into question the stability of the laws of Ealdgyth's world, established a fantastic context in which her final action can be framed and interpreted. When set within this context, the idea that she might miraculously achieve flight purely by her own force of will, without any technological assistance, can no longer be dismissed out of hand. In this way, the fantastic

¹³⁴ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 83.

¹³⁵ Michio Kaku, *Hyperspace: A Scientific Odyssey Through Parallel Universes, Time Warps, and the Tenth Dimension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 260–1.

serves to provoke hesitations even regarding what would normally, or in other contexts, be considered non-fantastic events.¹³⁶

As well as serving important narrative functions, the fantastic has a crucial, albeit complicated, effect in shaping the novel's relationship with the past. By provoking a hesitation between uncanny and marvellous interpretations, the fantastic exerts what is perhaps best described as a 'push-pull' effect, which renders the past simultaneously relatable and profoundly other. On the one hand – as illustrated by Eilmer's speech on miracles, quoted above – embracing the fantastic allows the historical novelist to represent period-appropriate worldviews that to modern, secular, scientific sensibilities might otherwise seem distinctly alien. In the case of *Flight*, the introduction of fantastic elements enables the reader to enter into an early medieval world pregnant with meaning, in which signs and portents were regularly to be found in nature and in the heavens. The idea of such a world is perhaps most clearly expressed by Ælfric of Eynsham in his sermon for Midlent Sunday, in which he explains that God causes wonders to happen on a daily basis, but that they are 'much weakened in men's sight' because they are common: 'It is a greater *wundor* [wonder] that God Almighty each day feeds all the world, and directs the good, than that *wundor* was, that he filled five thousand men with five loaves'.¹³⁷ This notion that all things in the world were essentially wondrous, since

¹³⁶ A secondary factor in bringing about the hesitation at the novel's conclusion is, of course, the present-tense voice: there is no implied continuation of the story beyond the end of the novel, as there would be if it were narrated retrospectively in the past tense. (If it were narrated in the past tense, it would be more difficult to achieve this hesitation, since it would be implied that Ealdgyth lived to tell the tale.) It is also worth noting that Ealdgyth does not say explicitly what she thinks she is doing in this scene: whether she is attempting to fly, or whether she is consciously jumping to her death. A further hesitation is therefore encouraged, because her precise intentions are withheld from the reader.

¹³⁷ Translation from Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 83. For the original Old English text see: Peter Clemoes, ed., *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series: Text*, Early English Text Society, SS 17 (Oxford: Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press, 1997), 277.

they proceeded from the first and greatest miracle of Creation, can be traced back to St Augustine.¹³⁸ When Eilmer, shortly before his rumination on miracles, refers to the world as being like a book that one must learn how to read (62), he is directly echoing the following passage from Augustine's *Sermons on Matthew*:

The appearance of Creation is itself a kind of great book: gaze upon, attend to, read its higher and lower [parts]. God did not make letters in ink from which you might know him: he placed before your eyes these things which he made. [...] Attend devoutly to the heaven and the earth.¹³⁹

Not only does this theological framework provide a context in which the fantastic can be interpreted and rationalised (as I mentioned in the previous chapter), but also – vice versa – the introduction of fantastic events provides a context for and gives substance to this theological framework, illustrating and elucidating its workings for the reader and so helping to communicate an early eleventh-century conception of the world. In this regard, then, the fantastic contributes towards the reconstruction of a historically authentic past, helping to ‘pull’ it closer to the reader and make it more relatable.

In other key respects, however, the function of the fantastic in *Flight* is precisely the opposite: it seeks to ‘push’ the past away by rendering it strange,

¹³⁸ C.S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 21, 23.

¹³⁹ Translation from Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 165–6. Neville notes that the nature-as-book metaphor was widespread during the Middle Ages, and that although it probably did not originate with Augustine, Augustine's writings were certainly widely known in early medieval England. For the original Latin text see: P.-P. Verbraken et al., eds., *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Sermones in Matthaeum*, vol. 1: Sermones LI-LXX, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 41Aa (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 443.

inaccessible and ‘other’. The best way to demonstrate this is through examining the treatment afforded to one of the few historical events represented in the text: the one for which the novel is titled and which originally inspired it, namely Eilmer’s flight. Since the novel is narrated by Ealdgyth and seen through her eyes, this event is not depicted directly: it took place, we are told, some ten years before her arrival at the abbey, and so her knowledge of it is second-hand. To the very end of the novel it remains shrouded in mystery and subject to a variety of interpretations. For various reasons the monks are reluctant to speak about it in great detail; as I mentioned in Chapter 1, it is a source of personal and collective trauma that they prefer not to confront. As a result, it is never described in full by those who witnessed it; it is often skirted around, and elements of it are concealed. The finer points of the winged apparatus that Eilmer constructed, its design and construction, the nature of the materials used, and the means by which he fixed it to his person, are never revealed. Ealdgyth’s understanding of the event is pieced together from different accounts and remains incomplete.

The purpose of this evasion and obfuscation is, in the first instance, to nudge the reader away from the automatic assumption that Eilmer’s flight can be explained by reference to the familiar laws of nature. By shying away from discussion of the event, an interpretive gap is opened up in which other explanations become possible to entertain. In Chapter 1 I showed how Hilary Mantel in *Wolf Hall* makes creative use of the missing years of Thomas Cromwell’s life and career to establish a sense of mystery regarding her protagonist’s origins.¹⁴⁰ In a very similar way I make creative use of the ambiguities present in the original source text for Eilmer’s flight – William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regum Anglorum* – by carrying these over into my novel. William gives very little information whatsoever about the flying apparatus or how it was constructed: all he tells us is that ‘by some art, I know not what, he [Eilmer] had fixed wings to his hands and feet’ (*nam pennas manibus et pedibus haud scio qua innexuerat arte*).¹⁴¹ He does not expand upon the

¹⁴⁰ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell*, 22–3.

¹⁴¹ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:413–15. It is worth noting that *pennas* (in the plural) can be translated equally as ‘wings’ or as ‘feathers’: Sir William Smith and Sir John

precise nature of this ‘art’. James Paz suggests that, by using this ambiguous phrasing, William intends to cast Eilmer ‘in the mysterious role of a conjurer-craftsman’ comparable to the mythical Volund (Wayland) the Smith, who in Old Norse legend constructed wings from the feathers of captured birds in order to escape his imprisonment at the hands of King Niðuð.¹⁴² Whereas Richard P. Hallion and Maxwell Woosnam (and Paz, too, in passing) have discussed Eilmer’s flight as a feat of engineering and aeronautics, and speculated about the design of his apparatus, the materials and technologies used, and his intended and actual flightpaths, I have refrained in *Flight* from delving too deeply into the practicalities regarding the flight.¹⁴³ Rather than seek to explain it in these objective terms, instead I offer a subjective analysis rooted in what is intended to be an authentic, period-appropriate understanding of the world. My aim is not to rationalise Eilmer’s ‘art’ but rather to imbue it with a degree of mystique, and to frame it in similarly ambiguous terms to those that Paz argues that William intends. (Indeed it may very well be that this was how Eilmer’s flight was perceived by his real-life contemporaries.) In this way, this iconic act – around which so much else in the narrative revolves – is lifted from the level of the mundane, rational and uncanny, and instead positioned as a fantastic, quasi-supernatural event.

This positioning is made possible not because Eilmer’s flight, whether considered as a historical or as a narrative event, possesses any intrinsically fantastic qualities. As far as the modern reader is concerned, there is nothing necessarily mysterious about it. It can be readily accommodated within an understanding of the world based upon physical forces. After all, we live in an age in which

Lockwood, eds., ‘Penna’, in *Chambers Murray Latin-English Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1976). Either translation would make sense in this context; unfortunately William’s intended meaning is unclear.

¹⁴² Paz, ‘Human Flight’, 16, 25.

¹⁴³ Richard P. Hallion, *Taking Flight: Inventing the Aerial Age from Antiquity through the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16–19; Maxwell Woosnam, *Eilmer, 11th Century Monk of Malmesbury: The Flight and the Comet* (Malmesbury: Friends of Malmesbury Abbey, 1986), 22–9; Paz, ‘Human Flight’, 1–2.

aeroplanes and helicopters are familiar and commonplace, and in which there exist many other types of winged apparatus designed for the purpose of conveying humans (microlights, autogyros, gliders, hang gliders, paragliders, wingsuits). Eilmer's flight as a historical event seems extraordinary and inspires wonder primarily because we regard it as being centuries ahead of its time conceptually and technologically: as Hallion notes, he seems to have 'anticipated not only the modern hang glider but the engineering test pilot as well.'¹⁴⁴ Its positioning in the novel as a *fantastic* event – like Ealdgyth's leap of faith at the very end – is made possible entirely through its framing within the narrative. The feat is inextricably linked with the individual who performs it: a character who, as previously mentioned, is endowed with a number of peculiar and fantastic traits, such as the aforementioned gold-coloured rings around his pupils (29–30), and the scars on his back where wings might once have attached to his shoulderblades (175–7). For each of these characteristics one might posit a mundane explanation: his gold irises might be rationalised as the product of rare pigmentation; Eilmer himself suggests that his scars might be the result of injuries he sustained during his crash-landing. Collectively, however, these traits add up to paint a picture of a singularly exceptional, and perhaps even otherworldly, individual. It is the concatenation of such fantastic characteristics that increasingly provokes the hesitation in Ealdgyth – and thus in the reader. Are they evidence that Eilmer is in fact something more than (or other than) human, possibly angelic or quasi-angelic, incredible as that might seem? Ealdgyth's inability to determine his nature feeds into the uncertainties regarding his flight that arise over the course of the novel, and vice versa. What, deep down, was Eilmer looking to achieve or prove? Should his success in traversing the remarkable distance of more than 200 yards be attributed to his technological and engineering skill, or perhaps to some undefined, innate ability? Or do his crash-landing and consequent injuries prove that he is merely human after all, as fragile and as fallible as any other person? These are some of the questions Ealdgyth faces as she attempts to ascertain what exactly happened and, more

¹⁴⁴ Hallion, *Taking Flight*, 18.

importantly, *how* it happened – questions to which there are no straightforward or binary answers. When Eilmer, in his final appearance in the novel, asserts that the problem was not that he had too much faith in his own abilities, but that he had too little (253), it ensures that the reader's hesitation regarding both his nature and that of his flight persists beyond the end of the text. He goes on to tell Ealdgyth: 'Faith is everything [...] With it, we can achieve whatever we set our heart upon' (253). Should we believe him when he makes this declaration or not? By this point in the story, the notion that a simple lack of self-belief might have been the only impediment to his ambition of human flight no longer seems entirely outlandish. Either Eilmer's declaration stems from a deeply philosophical insight into the workings of the world, or else it signals the level of delusion to which he has irrevocably sunk: either one of these statements might be true, but not both at the same time, and so a hesitation is brought about.

Framed in these fantastic terms, Eilmer's flight is thus transformed from a historical event that is capable of being rationalised into something mysterious and arcane: a singular feat, verging on the impossible; one that perhaps will never be replicated; one that is even to some extent beyond the power of language to describe or define. It is worth noting that the words 'flight' and 'fly' do not appear anywhere in the text; occasionally Eilmer refers to his 'accident' while his fellow monks speak of his 'fall', but both of these words only describe particular aspects or readings of the event rather than the whole thing. Because what happened to him that day eludes description, and because different characters regard different elements of it as meaningful or instructive, it defies easy comprehension. And it is precisely because it is difficult to comprehend that, in the manner of the fantastic, it elicits a powerful emotional response. As Eilmer says of his flight: 'it is because they [the other monks] don't understand it that they are afraid' (119). Through the use of fantastic elements, the past is thus not only made to seem indeterminate and hard-to-access, as I discussed in Chapter 2, but it is also cast as strange, frightening and 'other'. The world depicted in *Flight* is precarious, capricious, unpredictable, confusing, frequently troubling, governed by laws that seem to be increasingly breaking down – and, ultimately, is incapable of being explained. Even if one accepts that everything that happens is God's will, understanding what his

purpose might be remains all but impossible. In this way, even as the fantastic helps make the past relatable to the reader, in the sense that it offers a means of entering into an authentic, period-appropriate understanding of the world ('pull'), at the same time, by exploring the limitations of that understanding, it works against itself to conjure up a past that is shady and profoundly alien ('push').

As a result of the push-pull effect they exert – the way in which they render the past simultaneously relatable and profoundly other – fantastic-historical narratives offer three principal advantages. Firstly, they allow the novelist to approach the past in ways that address the existential concerns of the present moment, summarised by Boxall as the 'apprehension of a future that is unreadable to us [...] a new kind of apocalyptic fear, the sense in the culture not only that we cannot envisage the future clearly, but that there might in fact be no future for us at all.'¹⁴⁵ We live in an increasingly impermanent, anxious world whose future feels ever more provisional. In January 2020, the hands of the symbolic Doomsday Clock, maintained by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, were moved forward to 100 seconds to midnight – the closest they have ever been, reflecting the *Bulletin's* judgement that the world is at greater risk of man-made catastrophe than at any point since the Clock was first instituted in 1947.¹⁴⁶ Technological developments and a rapidly expanding global population have multiplied the possible ways by which we might bring about our own destruction, ranging from environmental degradation and climate change to nuclear annihilation. We also face a wide array of natural, non-anthropogenic existential hazards, both terrestrial (super-eruptions, giant tsunamis) and cosmic (asteroid strikes, gamma-ray bursts), of which science is continually improving our understanding and awareness.¹⁴⁷ The ongoing

¹⁴⁵ Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 215–16.

¹⁴⁶ Emily Holden and Julian Borger, 'Doomsday Clock Lurches to 100 Seconds to Midnight – Closest to Catastrophe Yet', *The Guardian*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/23/doomsday-clock-100-seconds-to-midnight-nuclear-climate>.

¹⁴⁷ Bill McGuire, *Global Catastrophes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), xii–xiv; A.L. Melott et al., 'Did a Gamma-Ray Burst Initiate the Late Ordovician Mass Extinction?', *International Journal of Astrobiology* 3, no. 1 (2004): 60.

Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the threat posed by new and virulent infections to which we have no immunity: a threat that is intensifying due to human activities.¹⁴⁸ It is through back-projecting some of these anxieties and uncertainties, and reflecting a sense of the precarity of the present in our depictions of the past, that I believe historical fiction in the twenty-first century is best able to speak to current concerns. Fantastic-historical narratives offer a particularly fruitful means of achieving this. By conjuring up worlds whose laws are unstable and whose course is governed by powerful, impersonal forces barely within the comprehension (and certainly beyond the control) of the characters involved, they are able to draw parallels with present concerns such as those I have listed above, and thus draw attention to the limits of the individual and his or her agency.

In the particular case of *Flight*, the apocalyptic concerns of the present are curiously mirrored in the period in which it is set – the early eleventh century – when the imminence of the Last Judgement formed ‘a pressing concern and an essential element’ in religious and political discourse.¹⁴⁹ Fears of an imminent apocalypse were current long before the year 1000, it should be said: at the end of the sixth century Pope Gregory I noted the occurrence of certain signs in the natural world (earthquakes, plagues) that he believed foreshadowed the end of the world, plus others in the heavens that were yet to occur but which he believed would soon follow.¹⁵⁰ However, such concerns seem to have acquired new relevance and immediacy in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries: a shared sense that the year 1000 represented a significant milestone on the way to the Last Judgement can be found in the writings of Archbishop Wulfstan and Byrhtferth of Ramsey – both prominent intellectuals of the period – as well as in the Blickling Homilies.¹⁵¹ Although a fear of the imminent end of the world is alluded to only twice in *Flight*

¹⁴⁸ McGuire, *Global Catastrophes*, xi.

¹⁴⁹ Catherine Cubitt, ‘Apocalyptic and Eschatological Thought in England around the Year 1000’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (2015): 52.

¹⁵⁰ Foot, ‘Plenty, Portents and Plague’, 40.

¹⁵¹ Cubitt, ‘Apocalyptic and Eschatological Thought’, 31–2.

– firstly by Eilmer while discussing Ealdgyth’s dream (57), and secondly by the pilgrim-scholar Æffa on the night the beacon is lit (165) – the narrative is nevertheless underscored by a growing sense that time is running out for Ealdgyth, for the abbey, and for the world at large. It is possible to read some of the fantastic events that take place (the snowfall, the hailstorm, the premature defoliation of the landscape, etc.) in this context, as signs portending a coming apocalypse. Through its use of the fantastic, the novel is thus able to make a connection between the not dissimilar existential concerns of past and present, and, in so doing, to make the past more approachable on an emotional or affective level. *Flight* could be said to represent something of a special case, since its choice of setting lends itself particularly well to forging such a connection, but that is not to say that similar parallels to our current concerns cannot be found in other settings.

A second characteristic of fantastic-historical narratives is that, by working to destabilise what we know (or what we think we know) about the past, they remind us that it, too, was once the present – as provisional and uncertain of its direction of travel as our own current reality. It is always tempting from the privileged standpoint of the present to interpret history teleologically, as a sequence of stepping stones leading up to our own time. Hallion’s off-handed remark that Eilmer seems to have ‘anticipated’ future developments in aeronautics is but one minor example of such an interpretation; his account of early aviation places Eilmer in the vanguard of a particular branch of scholarly enquiry and technological development leading ultimately and inexorably towards the Wright brothers’ sustained powered flight at Kitty Hawk in December 1903. Hallion makes Eilmer’s endeavours seem familiar, part of a clear narrative with an obvious goal; the risk of such an approach is that we lose sight of their novelty and uniqueness in their own time. We cannot, of course, ever know for certain what the historical Eilmer’s true objectives were – the best we can do is attempt to infer them by identifying, as James Paz does, his cultural, intellectual and theological context.¹⁵² Who knows what sorts of futures Eilmer envisaged for himself or for his flying

¹⁵² Paz, ‘Human Flight’, *passim*.

apparatus, or how those visions were derailed when his crash-landing left him unable to walk? Who knows how those around him truly felt about the nascent technology he had invented, or what anxieties or hopes it instilled in them? Incorporating the fantastic into historical fiction allows us to reappraise the past as if it were present, with a tentative and provisional vision of its own future, and to appreciate the strangeness, novelty and wonder of events as they occur, without presuming that we know where they will lead.¹⁵³ It is sometimes said that one of the inherent longstanding issues with historical fiction – particularly the sort, exemplified by Mantel’s Cromwell novels, that focusses on and is shaped and directed by real-life events – is the question of how the writer maintains suspense. Because the past has already happened, it is argued, the end is necessarily predetermined. For Adam Mars-Jones it is precisely this teleological sense ‘of moving towards a predestined end that makes most historical novels so unsatisfying.’¹⁵⁴ Of course, this sense of predestination offers ample potential for the development of dramatic irony through the disparity of awareness between character and reader, as Mantel observes.¹⁵⁵ But dramatic irony and suspense create different effects; they are not equivalent. Fantastic-historical narratives offer a neat solution to this question of how to maintain suspense: by disrupting commonplace notions of causality and temporality, they establish worlds in which the outcome is *always* in doubt, in which the ending cannot be second-guessed.

¹⁵³ The present-tense narration in *Flight* acts in synergy with the fantastic in cultivating this sense of provisionality, of precarity, of living in the immediate moment. Whereas in the past tense the telling of events takes place retrospectively and is therefore layered and mediated to a greater or lesser extent by the narrator’s *post hoc* understanding of those events, the present tense actively calls attention to what Ron Tanner calls ‘the very difficult task of making sense of things as they happen’, a phrase which aptly describes the hesitation produced by the fantastic. Ron Tanner, quoted in David Jauss, *On Writing Fiction: Rethinking Conventional Wisdom About the Craft* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest, 2011), 96.

¹⁵⁴ Adam Mars-Jones, ‘Human Origami’, *London Review of Books* 43, no. 5 (4 March 2021): 32.

¹⁵⁵ Mantel, ‘Can These Bones Live?’, 6.

Thirdly and finally, by confronting the reader with dilemmas of faith (to believe or not to believe?) fantastic depictions of the past bring to the fore the sorts of questions we all face whenever we critically engage with a text, whether that text is a historical non-fiction work, a primary source, or even a historical novel. How much of this can I trust? Is this a reliable and accurate account? Did this really happen? We often say of unusual events that ‘you couldn’t make it up’, or that ‘truth is stranger than fiction’.¹⁵⁶ The further back in time we probe and the fewer sources we have at our disposal, the harder it becomes to construct meaningful historical narratives and the less comprehensible the past grows – and thus the stranger, less familiar, more ‘other’ it can seem. The fantastic-historical narrative offers an overt, literal strategy for communicating and embracing this strangeness, and suggests that the past might be essentially unknowable in empirical terms. If those who lived through it could not explain what they experienced, what chance do we in the present have of doing any better? And yet if we are to say anything at all about the past, we must trust in the testimony of our sources and the stories they contain. The fantastic draws attention to this essential conundrum. We might question the nature of the events Ealdgyth reports and even her reliability as a witness, but her account is the only one available to the reader: if we choose to disregard it wholesale, there is no story. In a similar way we might question William of Malmesbury’s astonishing account of Eilmer’s flight, upon which my entire novel is founded. Does his version of events represent the truth of the matter? How much of what he describes really took place? We have no way of being certain. We have no other primary sources with which we might compare his account. There is no way of judging it except on its own terms. It is a story that has been handed down to us – no more and no less. Whether or not we choose to believe him is a matter, ultimately, of trust. In drawing attention to such questions,

¹⁵⁶ The roots of the second of these two phrases can be traced back to Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819–24), canto 14, stanza 101 (“’Tis strange—but true; for truth is always strange; / Stranger than fiction.”): Elizabeth Knowles, ed., ‘Lord Byron’, in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199668700.001.0001/q-author-00010-00000553>.

fantastic-historical novels open up a discursive space in which not only the meaning of the past can be debated (as I discussed in Chapter 1) but also its substance. By provoking hesitations regarding the events they describe, fantastic-historical novels invite the reader to contemplate the issues associated with evaluating and interpreting the subjective evidence of our sources, and so draw attention to the provisionality of historical narratives. In this way they encourage critical engagement with the narratives presented, reflect some of the complexities of the historical process, and above all highlight the centrality of faith.



6. Sign, dating to the 1960s, from The Flying Monk pub. The pub was demolished in 1984 and the sign is now exhibited in the Athelstan Museum, Malmesbury.

Conclusion

One thing which has become clear over the course of this commentary is how remarkably ill-suited the blanket term ‘historical fiction’ is to the task of describing the manifold and complex ways in which the past is rendered creatively in the twenty-first century. Writers typically employ several modes of pastness when depicting their chosen periods and subjects on the page. These modes, which overlap in the form of a bricolage and sometimes even contradict one another, result in renderings of the past whose inflections often have little to do with historical recreation or reconstruction. Not only that, but a certain degree of anachronism is inherent in our visions of the past; we cannot as writers dissociate ourselves entirely from our social and cultural environments – even if this were desirable. We write to a greater or lesser degree in modern styles, putting modern words and phrases into the mouths of our characters. A text’s historicalness can therefore never be more than partial, whatever its author might wish or intend or claim; this is as true of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* as it is of *Flight*. Indeed, the very phrase ‘historical fiction’ is an oxymoron, representing a paradox that cannot be easily resolved. Creative writers working with the past typically find themselves drawn in two opposing directions: by the historical-ethical imperative (to offer an accurate and authentic representation of the past) and by the storyteller’s imperative (to imagine). Committing to the historical-ethical imperative means restricting one’s imaginative horizons, limiting the possibilities offered by the form that is fiction. Committing to the storyteller’s imperative, on the other hand, means surrendering one’s claim to offer a historically faithful representation of one’s chosen subject.

Some of the confusion regarding fiction’s relationship with the past undoubtedly stems from the fact that, in the English language, the noun ‘history’ and its adjectival form ‘historical’ are used to refer both to the past and to the study of the past. Throughout this commentary I have used them by and large in the

second, more formal sense, but in popular usage the two meanings are often elided. Accordingly, when a work of fiction is labelled ‘historical’, it can mean two things. It can mean simply that it is set in the past; but it can also give the impression that its author has adopted some of the methodologies and analytical techniques of the historian, has made rigorous studies of the sources, and so is staking some manner of claim to a historian’s authority. Throughout this commentary I have tended to prefer the phrase ‘fiction set in the past’, which offers clarity, neutrality, inclusivity and universality, and encompasses the full range of modes, approaches and strategies by which fiction renders the past. Even as I propose it as an alternative, however, I also recognise that the existing label – which is well established among writers, readers, publishers and critics – is unlikely to be supplanted any time soon. That being the case, it is vital that, as writer-practitioners, readers and critics, we advance the focus of discussion beyond the historicalness (or lack thereof) of historical fiction – a concern for which has ‘bedevilled’ scholarship, to borrow Jerome de Groot’s lively turn of phrase – and recognise the multiple and diverse functions and objectives of fictions set in the past.¹⁵⁷

I have argued that one of the key challenges facing historical fiction in the twenty-first century is not merely to engage with the past on its own terms but, more importantly, to engage with it actively on *our* terms and reappraise and rework it in ways that are relevant to our present circumstances – and even to become a vehicle by which writers and readers might contemplate their own difficult and uncertain future. One of the ways in which it can do this, and at the same time reaffirm a sense of its own independent legitimacy, is through embracing the fantastic. As we have seen, due to the ‘push-pull’ effect that fantastic-historical narratives exert – the way in which they simultaneously defamiliarise the past and make it more relatable – they can help forge an emotional connection with the past while also conveying a sense of its inherent strangeness, uncertainty and provisionality. As a result, they are particularly well equipped not only to speak to the existential concerns of the present but also to highlight the dilemmas of faith we

¹⁵⁷ de Groot, *Remaking History*, 3.

regularly encounter in our interactions with the past, whether these interactions are mediated by primary sources, secondary literature, or fiction. I do not claim that the fantastic is the only strategy capable of addressing these challenges and issues, but it is the one I have chosen in *Flight*: a particularly appropriate one, I feel, for the exploration of a period plagued by its own existential anxieties and for the development of a narrative concerning two real-life individuals whose lives are themselves shrouded in mystery. The novel does not claim to represent the truth of their experience, or necessarily expect to arrive at anything close to it. It is an extrapolation, a speculative flight of fancy, inspired by history but not constrained by it. By employing fantastic elements, it serves to highlight that all imaginative approaches to the past are, in essence, fantasies of a sort.

The initial concept for *Flight* was sparked by my encounters with two short passages in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. And yet while the novel was inspired by the historical events recorded in those primary sources, it does not derive its legitimacy from those events and sources and it is not defined by them. If I have done my job as a writer properly, then readers will believe in Eilmer and Ealdgyth not because they are historical figures but because they are convincing characters. Whether I succeed or not depends entirely on the strength of my writing, on the credibility of the fictional world I have constructed for them, and on whether or not they 'come alive' on the page. And that is how it should be. Indeed, unless a swathe of new primary sources bearing new information somehow come to light, the characters I have created are more fully realised, more fleshed out, more capable of being comprehended as living, feeling human beings, than their historical counterparts will ever be. The fictional versions have become untethered from the real-life originals; they must now survive independently of the historical record. It is not necessary to insist that Eilmer and Ealdgyth really lived, or that the novel is based on historical events, to justify the novel's existence. After all, the reader will almost certainly come to the novel without any prior knowledge of these two individuals, and possibly not much knowledge of eleventh-century England either. Narrative hooks cannot be dangled from outside the covers of the book. They must come from within the story, and the story must be capable of standing by itself.

Of course, a novel is never about just one subject or theme. Historical fiction is never solely about history. A novel might be set *in* the past but that doesn't mean it is necessarily always speaking *about* the past. For this reason, it would be wrong to consider a historical novel only in terms of its historical underpinnings, or in terms of its representation of the past, which can only yield a limited understanding of what it means. And yet self-evidently all historical fictions are concerned with the past to a certain degree. Why write stories set in the past at all, if not to offer some manner of perspective or to express a view on it? What I hope to have demonstrated in this commentary is that fiction's capacity to present the past and contribute towards discussion of it is far broader in scope than traditional models, guided by a strong historical-ethical imperative, would permit. Whenever we bring the past to life through fiction we render it in ways that conflict with this imperative, and indeed we will always find ourselves frustrated in our efforts to satisfy it. For the past is neither concrete and fixed, nor is it complete. As Ealdgyth observes soon after her arrival at the monastery, 'the past cracks and crumbles like a vessel left too long in the kiln [...] the pieces can never be put back the way they were' (26). Although it might be impossible to repair or restore the past exactly as it was, nevertheless through fiction we can re-envision, reimagine, redefine, reinvent, remould and recast it – actively reconstructing it in ways that suit us, that speak to our own contemporary society and its concerns, and that help us apprehend not only the periods in which we decide to set our narratives but also the present and, indeed, the future as well.

When we render the past creatively, we make it anew. That is the power, the prerogative and the value of historical fiction.

Appendix: Primary sources

I. Eilmer

Flight was originally inspired by my encounters with two short passages from primary sources, both of which relate events that occurred during the early eleventh century. The first of these, which I originally came across as long ago as 2005 while working on my undergraduate dissertation on the Norman Conquest, is from the *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (*The Deeds of the English Kings*) by the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury. Before beginning his account of the Norman invasion in 1066, William notes some of the prophecies and portents that foreshadowed the calamities about to befall the English kingdom. Chief among these portents was Halley's Comet, which appeared in the skies for a week that April and was witnessed, we're told, by a certain monk at Malmesbury by the Latin name of Eilmerus (more commonly rendered in modern scholarship as Eilmer). At this point William digresses from his main narrative to relate the tale of a remarkable feat undertaken by this Eilmer when he was a young man. The relevant passage is short, and it is worthwhile giving its English translation in full:

By the standards of those days he was a good scholar, advanced in years by now, though in his first youth he had taken a terrible risk: by some art, I know not what, he had fixed wings to his hands and feet, hoping to fly like Daedalus, whose fable he took to be true. Catching the breeze from the top of a tower, he flew for the space of a stade [approximately 200 yards, or a furlong] and more; but what with the violence of the wind and the eddies, and at the same time his consciousness of the temerity of his attempt, he faltered and fell, and ever thereafter he was an invalid

and his legs were crippled. He himself used to give as a reason for his fall, that he forgot to fit a tail on his hinder parts.¹⁵⁸

This incident is not recorded in any other contemporary or near-contemporary primary source. There is no inherent reason to doubt its essential accuracy, however: even though William was writing in the 1120s, many decades after the events he describes, he is usually regarded as a reliable source. R.M. Thomson suggests that William ‘probably’ learned of this event directly from Eilmer himself.¹⁵⁹ However, if we accept Thomson’s own reckoning that Eilmer was born in the mid-980s, then that means he would have needed to have lived to well over a hundred before he could possibly have met William, who was probably born no earlier than the late 1080s.¹⁶⁰ While this is not impossible, it is unlikely. It seems more reasonable to presume, as James Paz suggests, that William derived the story from a fellow monk at Malmesbury who knew Eilmer as an old man.¹⁶¹

That said, there is good reason to believe that Eilmer might have been born significantly later than Thomson and other scholars have traditionally supposed. Although the dating of his birth to the 980s is widely accepted, there is no direct evidential basis for it. It is entirely based on Eilmer’s identification of Halley’s Comet in 1066 with another comet that he had witnessed some years earlier: William reports him ‘crouching in terror at the sight of the gleaming star’ and saying, ‘It is long since I saw you’ (*dudum est quod te uidi*).¹⁶² Scholars have generally assumed that in making this remark Eilmer was referring to the 989 apparition of

¹⁵⁸ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:413–15.

¹⁵⁹ Thomson, ‘Eilmer’.

¹⁶⁰ R.M. Thomson, ‘Malmesbury, William of (b. c. 1090, d. in or after 1142), Historian, Man of Letters, and Benedictine Monk’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 23 September 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/29461>.

¹⁶¹ Paz, ‘Human Flight’, 4.

¹⁶² William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 1:412–13.

Halley, which, it is suggested, he could have remembered seeing as a young boy.¹⁶³ But there is at least one other candidate: the comet of 1018, which we know was visible in the British Isles because it is mentioned both in the Annals of Ulster and by Symeon of Durham.¹⁶⁴ If in fact this was the comet Eilmer was referring to, then it is possible that he could have been born perhaps as late as the 1010s – which would still arguably have made him ‘advanced in years’ (*aenu maturus*) by the time of the Norman Conquest.

This uncertainty about Eilmer’s birth date has crucial implications for the dating of his flight, regarding which William of Malmesbury gives us no precise information. The general consensus is that it took place sometime between 1000 and 1010, a date range that has been calculated based on: (a) the assumption that Eilmer was born in the 980s; and (b) William’s assertion that he was ‘in his first youth’ (*prima iuuentute*) when he made his attempt.¹⁶⁵ In writing *Flight* I have chosen to accept this consensus, in order to facilitate a meeting with Ealdgyth; thus in the story I fix Eilmer’s exploits as having occurred ten years prior to her arrival at the monastery, which is to say notionally in the year 1005. However, if the real-life Eilmer was not born until as late as the 1000s or the 1010s – and there is a very good chance he might not have been – then it might be that he did not make his flight attempt until the 1020s or even the 1030s. Not only that, but if we accept a later birth date for Eilmer, then – intriguingly – Thomson’s suggestion that William of Malmesbury might have known him personally (and so learnt the story of his flight directly from the man himself) becomes a little more plausible.

¹⁶³ Thomson, ‘Eilmer’; White, ‘Eilmer of Malmesbury’, 99; Paz, ‘Human Flight’, 4, 23.

¹⁶⁴ Simon Keynes, ‘The Comet in the Eadwine Psalter’, in *The Eadwine Psalter: Text, Image and Monastic Culture in Twelfth-Century*, ed. Margaret Gibson, T.A. Heslop, and Richard W. Pfaff (London and University Park, PA: The Modern Humanities Research Association in conjunction with the Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 162.

¹⁶⁵ Thomson, ‘Eilmer’; White, ‘Eilmer of Malmesbury’, 99; Paz, ‘Human Flight’, 4.

II. Ealdgyth

The second short passage that inspired *Flight* is to be found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle – a source roughly contemporary with the events it relates – in the annal for the year 1015. As with the story of Eilmer in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta*, the relevant excerpt is very brief:

In this year was the great assembly at Oxford, and there Ealdorman Eadric betrayed Siferth and Morcar, the foremost thegns in the Seven Boroughs: lured them into his chamber, and in there they were killed dishonourably. And the king then seized all their property, *and ordered Siferth's widow to be seized and brought inside Malmesbury* [my italics]. Then after a short while, the ætheling [king's son] Edmund travelled and took the woman against the king's will, and had her for wife.¹⁶⁶

The woman in question remains anonymous in the Chronicle. It is from the twelfth-century historian John of Worcester that we obtain her name: 'Aldgitha', a Latinised form of the Old English name Ealdgyth.¹⁶⁷ How John came by her name, when it does not appear to have been recorded anywhere else, is unclear. Ann Williams raises the possibility that he might have misidentified her: since we know from other sources that Ealdgyth was the name of Morcar's wife, and since Morcar and Siferth were brothers, she suggests that John might have confused the two women.¹⁶⁸ While this is certainly possible, there is no inherent reason why we

¹⁶⁶ ASC E s.a. 1015: Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 145–6.

¹⁶⁷ Swanton, 146 n. 3; John of Worcester, *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, ed. R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. Jennifer Bray and P. McGurk, vol. 2, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 480–1.

¹⁶⁸ Ann Williams, *Æthelred the Unready: The Ill-Counselled King* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 132, 221 n.7.

should mistrust John's account, which as it stands is perfectly plausible, since Ealdgyth was a common female name at the time.

There are a number of other details in this brief extract about which we cannot be absolutely certain. One is the location of Ealdgyth's incarceration. Michael Swanton assumes that by 'Malmesbury' the writer of the annal for 1015 means Malmesbury Abbey – and this is the interpretation I have adopted in *Flight* – but it should be noted that the text does not explicitly say so.¹⁶⁹ It is possible that Ealdgyth was held not in the monastery, which on the face of it would seem like an odd choice of prison, but elsewhere in the town. John of Worcester does not provide much clarity in this case: his account simply gives the location as *Maidulfi urbem* ('the city of Maildubh', the abbey's Irish founder), except in two manuscripts where no location is mentioned and a third where a further clarification (*id est Malmasberiam*, 'that is, Malmesbury') was apparently thought necessary and accordingly is supplied by a thirteenth-century interpolation.¹⁷⁰ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in its characteristically terse style, also omits any explanation as to why these events took place: a series of intriguing backstories are hinted at but not explored. What were the reasons behind the murders at Oxford? Why did Ealdgyth have to be imprisoned, and why was Malmesbury chosen? Why did the king, Æthelred II, not want his son to marry her?

Little more is known about Ealdgyth's life beyond the events described in this annal. Whether she went with the *atheling* Edmund gladly or whether she was abducted against her will is not clear. The Chronicler's stark language ('took the woman ... and had her for wife') does not give the impression that there was much affection in this relationship, but this is no more than speculation. Following her rescue/abduction, Ealdgyth is referred to in two charters, although she is not named in either. These charters have been preserved only in later copies.¹⁷¹ In the first (S 947), Edmund – styling himself unusually as *aeðeling rex* in anticipation,

¹⁶⁹ Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, 146 n. 4.

¹⁷⁰ John of Worcester, *The Chronicle of John of Worcester*, 2:480.

¹⁷¹ Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, 135.

seemingly, of his imminent accession to the kingship – grants lands formerly belonging to Siferth to the New Minster, ‘for the redemption of my soul and that of my wife and for the soul of Siferth’ (*pro redemptione animae meae et coniugis meae et pro anima Siuerði*).¹⁷² In the other (S 948), from Edmund to Thorney Abbey, a similar formulation is used but this time Siferth is not mentioned: he makes the grant ‘for the redemption of my soul and that of my wife and for security in this present life’ (*pro redemptione anime mee atque coniugi mee et pro presentis uite sospitate*).¹⁷³ These documents are curious for two reasons. Firstly, they appear to contradict the Chronicle’s statement that the king seized all of Siferth and Morcar’s property after their deaths – an indication, perhaps, that the ownership of Siferth’s former landholdings was contested. Secondly, it is questionable how much legitimacy (if any) they held, since issuing charters was a prerogative of the king.¹⁷⁴ This may well be the reason for Edmund’s unconventional styling in S 947: we might interpret the act of granting the land to the New Minster as an assertion of his own royal authority and as an act of rebellion against his father. (He did eventually succeed to the kingship in his own right following Æthelred’s death in April 1016, but his reign was short-lived: after warring against the Danish invasion army led by Cnut, he himself died that November.)

After these charters Ealdgyth disappears from recorded history. She is generally assumed to have been the mother of Edmund’s two sons, Edward Ætheling and Edmund – in which case she might well have accompanied them when they went into exile after their father’s death and Cnut’s accession to the English throne – but there is no evidence for this assumption. Were it not for these few sources and the scant information they provide, Ealdgyth would have vanished entirely into obscurity.

¹⁷² Williams, 134; ‘S 947’, The Electronic Sawyer: Online catalogue of Anglo-Saxon charters, accessed 21 April 2020, <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/947.html>.

¹⁷³ Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, 134; ‘S 948’, The Electronic Sawyer: Online catalogue of Anglo-Saxon charters, accessed 21 April 2020, <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/charter/948.html>.

¹⁷⁴ Williams, *Æthelred the Unready*, 134.

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Sample of the creative work

Faith is everything, he says.

He gazes up at the narrow window where the tired light leaches in. What he's searching for I can only guess. There's nothing to see. Only the branches of the ash trembling. The few leaves still clinging to them weep. The rain is abating; the clouds crowd closely but behind them the sky grows lighter. Not long until dawn.

It is faith that keeps us from despair, he says. It is faith that shows us the path to eternal life. With it, we can achieve whatever we set our heart upon. Without it, we are nothing.

At times like this it's impossible to tell whether he's reciting passages from his books, or whether he's speaking his own truth. He's frowning, as if something has occurred to him: a thought long mislaid, now found.

I ask, And what of those of us who lack faith?

His lips move slowly but no sound comes out, as though he's testing the shape of the words. Some secret incantation, maybe. Another of these habits of his. I've grown used to them, but that doesn't mean I like them. In the murk his face is ashen. For the first time I see grey flecks in his hair, above his ear. How have I never noticed them before? Have they always been there and I have merely been blind to them?

I say, Are you listening to me?

His hands are balled tight. His knuckles are white. It's as if he's forgotten I'm here. I sit not five feet from him but it might as well be a mile. All these weeks I've tried my best to be patient. Well, patience is an indulgence I can no longer afford. Outside, the branches shiver, and so do I. A flurry of leaves falls past the window.

There can't be many left; they have mostly fallen by now. I haven't yet grown used to the sight.

On the far side of this labyrinth, the bell rings and rings. They will be expecting him, as they flock once more to their sanctuary of stone to kneel and to pray and to hope. He thinks we are beyond hope, I know he does, though he won't admit it. He is too careful for that; he guards his feelings close to his heart. Above all he doesn't want to frighten me. Deep down he still thinks of me as a fledgling that he must keep safe. Barely hatched. Fragile. Not yet ready for the world beyond the nest.

The bell summons him. He reaches underneath his stool for his other stick and rises, still gazing up at that sliver of sky. His face is as dark as the clouds.

He says, I am afraid —

At midday, after we've eaten, they let me go down to the river to drink and cool my tired feet. Maybe it's a sign they're feeling sorry for me, or else they think it'll keep me quiet. One of them comes to unbind my wrists. He says nothing as he jerks at the cord and, scowling, picks at the knot. He pulls me closer so he can dig his nails in all the harder. Clenched teeth, twisted expression. I dare him to meet my gaze, but he won't. His cheek is still red: my small victory. He hasn't forgotten.

Give and you shall receive.

My hands free, I watch him stalk off, back to the company of his friends. This could be another trick, of course: a taste of freedom, enough to remind me of what I've lost. It's best if I don't seem too eager, just in case. I slip off my scuffed shoes with the soles that are nearly worn through. Dew-laden grass under my feet. The earthy tang of wild garlic in the air. White flowers sprinkled along the riverbank. A little way downstream a moorhen sits on its nest, chirping. If I close my eyes, I can believe myself elsewhere. Another place, another time. Before all this began.

They're watching me, of course. I feel their gazes resting on my back. After yesterday, they aren't about to let me from their sight. No chance this time of giving them the slip. I find a place where the bank has crumbled away and kneel amidst the reeds. Cupping my palms in the cool current, I sweep back my hair and bend towards the water. A stranger stares back at me. Wide eyes. Open mouth. Dark hair matted with mud, entwined with shreds of grass and fragments of leaves. A mask of purple across one side of her face.

Wild waif of the woods. Twisted elf-creature. Me but not me. Leaning closer, I try to make out familiar features. My right cheek is a mess of bruises, already turning to yellow in places, like cowslips in a lavender patch. I scrape a loose strand from in front of my face. A dark patch underneath my right eye. High up along the cheek, close to the bone, a line of dried blood. My hand is still dripping as I trace it along the cut, wincing at the sting, then reach up towards the back of my skull, feeling for the lump where I hit my head, or where they struck me: it all happened so quickly I don't remember which.

They're calling for me. I get to my feet before they grow impatient.

Silver and black. Black and silver. Lattice of moonlight upon the path. Weft and warp, light and shadow. It hangs like a tapestry across the pale walls, the pattern wavering as the branches bend in the wind. The tower looks down on us, proud and gleaming. The bell still rings. I first heard it as we were coming out of the woods, half a mile back. Now we're so close, almost right under it, I can feel it in my chest, in my bones.

Rough hands upon my shoulders, driving me forward, as though I'm some wayward heifer. My feet might be sore and swollen, but I can walk well enough without their shoving. I stumble on along the pitted track, my mud-died skirt dragging through the puddles. The gate-arch yawns before me, its neat wedges of stone like so-perfect teeth. The moment I pass through that maw, I'll be swallowed up, never to be seen again. The wind tugs at my cloak; the shadow-pattern on the stonework swims and shifts. I turn my gaze down to the ground, quickly, before the faintness overtakes me. I can't even put out my hands if I fall.

One step at a time, I tell myself. One foot before the other. What dignity they've left me with, I must hold on to. They've taken everything else.

They show me to my lodgings, a low building set some way from the church. The steward unlocks the door. It's like looking into the darkest of wells. I hesitate at the threshold, afraid of falling in. They ask me what I'm waiting for. One of them jabs me in the back. A part of me wants to protest but I hold my tongue as I stumble forward. There's laughter. Of course there is. One last chance to have their fun before they wash their hands of me. Their part is done.

The place looks like a well and it smells like one, too. Damp, as though no one has lit the hearth in many weeks. A chill has settled here: the kind that will not be chased away by fire alone. The kind that clings to every surface, gathers in every nook, every corner, that works its way into one's blood. The light of the steward's lantern plays across empty benches. A plain flagon upon a stool. A wooden cup. In the corner, a stout ironbound chest. A bundle of cloth laid on top of it. By the bed, a washbasin and chamber pot.

You'll sleep here tonight, the steward says. There's water, ale, blankets, everything you should need. Food will be brought soon.

And in the morning? What will happen to me then?

He says nothing as he sets the lantern down on the floor. I hear his heavy feet retreating, crunching the straw. The floorboards creak. The door shuts softly. A low mutter, in no words that I can understand, and then nothing.

All is still. For the first time since they came for me, I am alone.

Morning sun spills in through the high window. It runs down the far wall, pools on the floor at the foot of the dais. I sit in shadow on the stone sill that runs around the edge of the chamber, hands folded in my lap, watching the tall one as he paces slowly first one way and then the other, seemingly

distracted. Sandalled soles skimming the slabs. Steps so soft they are almost silent.

The abbot sits stiffly upon his carved throne, fingering the wooden cross at his breast, looking me up and down.

That was wrong of them, he says. They had no right to do that. We are all God's children, and each in our own way precious.

He is speaking, of course, about my bruises, and I see he is perturbed. As well he might be, even though he is not to blame. He never asked for this. We have that much in common, I suppose. Strange how already it feels like forever ago. I still feel a dull ache where they struck me, but the memory no longer stings quite like it did. Time melts like butter, and the harder I try to hold on to it the quicker it slips through my fingers.

He says, I will speak to the infirmarian. I will see if he might prepare a salve. A poultice, perhaps. Something to ease the pain and help you mend.

It isn't necessary, I say. I'm fine.

He looks uncertainly at me, but doesn't press the matter. I'm not fine, but it's not the marks on my face that trouble me. Besides, the last thing I want is some stranger, for too long starved of a woman's touch, running his fingers over my face, asking where it hurts.

He sighs and gestures to the tall one. Ceolred, the abbot called him. Withy-thin, greying at the temples, though the rest of his face does not look so old. Sharp-featured, with sharp eyes that I imagine miss little. He stops pacing and stands directly in front of me. He means to intimidate me, but I am not so easily cowed. I know his kind.

Ceolred asks, You know why you're here, don't you?

Say nothing unless you must, I tell myself. Let him think what he wants. Give nothing of yourself away that you don't have to.

Yes, I say.

For the good of your soul, he says. He gives me a look as if expecting me to challenge him, but it would make no difference if I did and so I let it pass.

The abbot rests his hands on his stomach. He gazes down at his feet, as if he would rather be elsewhere. It's not just my bruises that distress him, I realise. My very presence makes him uncomfortable. I am a complication, foisted upon him against his will: a distraction from his holy works, a threat to the harmony of this house. Of all the souls he could have been tasked with saving, he is given mine. How he must detest me, although at least he is kind enough to try to hide it. He must wonder what he has done to deserve this burden.

Ceolred says, I promise you will be quite safe in our care. As long as you're here you have no need to fear anyone or anything.

He smiles as if to reassure me, but his smile is as thin as the rest of him, and I can see right through it.

I ask, How long will that be?

You are to stay confined to the monastery, he says, as if he hasn't heard. You will be free to roam the grounds as you please, so long as you do not disturb the brothers at their prayers or distract them from their work.

I say, I am to be a prisoner.

A guest of our community, he says, and the set of his mouth makes it seem like he means it sincerely.

A guest?

In time we will seek out a nunnery willing to take you in, he says. A place where a widow in mourning such as yourself might retreat from the world and all its troubles. A place where your sins might be cleansed. Where you might find fulfilment in a life dedicated to contemplation and to purity. For now, however, this is the best we can offer.

The last thing I want is to live in a convent. I don't want to be surrounded by men of God, still less a gaggle of nuns. I don't need to be lectured on the proper forms of worship, or be preached to on the error of my ways. I know what they will say. I have heard it all before, many times over.

No, I say. I won't do it.

You understand this is not a matter of choice.

You can't make me. I refuse.

He shakes his head gently. His eyes overflowing with pity. So much pity that it verges on contempt. The truth is I would rather die than live out the rest of my days as a hostage of the Church, a slave to prayer and devotion, locked away from the world and all its joys.

He sits beside me on the narrow ledge, not so close that it would be unseemly, but close enough that I can smell the grime seeping from his pores. Close enough to make me want to stand and run as far from this room as I can. Out the door, across the garth, trampling their carefully tended flowerbeds, through the passageway and away, into the light.

It would do no good. The furthest I could go is my dank lodgings and the hard mattress. They have me trapped, like a gilt in a pen. I have seen the walls that encircle this place. Built to keep the world out, now they keep me in.

He says, Perhaps, my lady, before anything else, we ought to begin with confession.

I glance again at the abbot, who has been silent all this while. He is nodding to himself, his eyes half-lidded. He clutches his cross. His hands are shaking as he lifts it to his lips. I hate him. I hate both of them.

I say, I have nothing to confess.

They leave me in the care of another monk. He is younger than either of them. Younger than me, too, I think, although there cannot be much in it. A year or two, perhaps. Freckle-faced and thin in the cheek. So unsure of where his limbs end that, in coming down the steps, he almost trips over the hem of his habit.

He sits across the chamber from me, his book opened out on a stand in front of him. Every once in a while, he glances up. He wants to make sure, I suppose, that I haven't gone to sleep, though he has no way of knowing how many hours I lay awake last night. As soon as he sees me looking back at him he averts his gaze. He hurries over the words, his pointer juddering back and forth along the lines, halting only when he reaches a difficult passage. His tongue is as clumsy as his feet.

You missed a line, I say.

He looks up, and at once all the blood in his body seems to run to his cheeks.

He says, Wh-what?

For behold you have loved truth, I say. The uncertain and hidden things of your wisdom you have made manifest to me.

His mouth opens and closes again; his voice has deserted him. Still blushing, he tries to recover his place.

I say, I'm not what you think I am.

His hand hovers over the page. He swallows.

Whatever you've heard about me, it isn't true.

He takes a deep breath, lays down the pointer and presses his fingers to his temples.

I say, I'm not your enemy.

Stop, he says. Please stop.

My backside is numb after sitting so long in one spot, but I resist the urge to shift. I don't want him to think I'm uncomfortable. He might be the one with the book, but I can't let him feel he is in charge.

I already know the psalms, I tell him.

Whether you do or not, he says, the words catching in his throat, I've been told I must read to you, and that's what I intend to do.

Maybe this is how they plan to be rid of me: by boring me to death. If nothing else I have to get out of this room. There are only so many times I can count the tiles while he stumbles over his Latin. If they think I'm going to be watched over by this child, they're mistaken. I have to get away from this monkling and his verses.

Very well, I say. I'll let you read to me. But I have one request first.

A request?

I would like some water.

Water?

He cannot really be this slow in the head. It is only because he is frightened that he acts this way.

He glances towards the open doorway. Searching for someone from whom he can ask permission, I'm guessing. I don't imagine his instructions included anything about meeting my needs. Or does he hesitate because they're not supposed to eat or drink except at mealtimes? So much I must learn if I am to live among them.

I shall fetch some, he says.

He closes his book and stands. Makes for the door. Starts climbing the steps.

Wait here.

Of course, I say, as sweetly as I can manage and offer him a smile as a parting gift. He reddens once more. Such pleasures are probably hard to come to by in this place, I imagine. Maybe that's an unwise assumption. Who

knows? For a moment I feel strangely sorry for him, but only for a moment. Unlike me, he is here by choice.

He turns swiftly and is gone. I hear him hurrying along the passageway, his footsteps receding. As soon as I can no longer hear him, I edge my way up the steps, towards the doorway, listening carefully for others. Nothing but birdsong. I press myself against the wall and peer past the jamb, out into the covered passageway beyond. No one. The cloister is deserted. A bright square of blue above. A butterfly flits between the posts: the first I've seen this year. In the garth a sparrow chirrup in protest. It darts, startled, across the path that divides the shrubs from the poppy-patch. No sign of the monkling.

It isn't freedom, but it's something.

This is how I will remember him.

Siferth in the dawn, swathed in his cloak, hair ruffled by the breeze. Lips pursed, brow set. His hand cold in mine. Red lines across his knuckles. We stand together in the thin light. To the east, the ridge stands proud of the fog. To the south, the empty road.

Siferth in the middle of the day. Sitting at table, eyes intent as he carves into an apple. He prises a slice away; the flesh offers itself up. He holds the piece to the light, turning it back and forth, then sets it down in his bowl and begins again.

Siferth in the evening. Horn gripped firmly, head tipped back. Roaring, fists raised, wiping the froth from his lips, teeth gleaming in the firelight, soul bared to the world. Our eyes meet across the room. At once he is still, and for that one moment he is entirely mine.