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## **Fictional Frontiers: The Interrelation of Fact and Fiction between the World and the Text**

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## TITLE PAGE

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## Abstract

This article explores the pervasiveness of fiction in our everyday world and in written discourse. It also examines the boundaries between factual and fictional works which have been challenged, particularly in the twentieth century, with works such as the nonfiction novel. We interpret the world in terms of fiction which, in its broadest sense, shapes our everyday world. We tell stories about events in our lives and create characters from people we know. Translating the world into discourse is also characterized by poiesis. It involves an imaginative leap and a shaping force which creates different genres. Verisimilitude, an image of reality accepted by a particular age, is necessary, not only in translating the world into a fictional work, but equally in the representation of the real in factual works. Moving from the general to the specific, the article then turns to the example of nineteenth-century historical works, both factual and fictional, focusing on the examples of Michelet's *Histoire de la révolution française* and Balzac's *Les Chouans*. But what separates a factual work from a fictional one, given the often complex interrelation of fact and fiction in discourse? Facts are themselves a construct and the product of nineteenth-century positivism. Many modern factual histories use the narrative form, into which the truth or facts of history are

incorporated and which must of necessity include subjective interpretation and selectivity. Often a more obvious fictional technique is introduced into factual works. Michelet uses dramatic scenes to bring his story of history alive. Balzac introduces many historical facts into his novel *Les Chouans*, but these facts are used in very different ways to those found in factual histories. In addition, much of the material in the novel, such as the composite characters, is invented. However, the issue is far more complex than a simplistic distinction between factual and fictional elements in a text, and fictional works often have a purpose which is very different from that of simply imitating factual paradigms, as this article seeks to demonstrate.

Key words: Fact Fiction History Narrative Michelet Balzac

### **Fictional Frontiers: The Interrelation of Fact and Fiction between the World and the Text.<sup>1</sup>**

Imagination, a licentious and vagrant faculty, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint, has always endeavoured to baffle the logician, to perplex the confines of distinction, and burst the enclosures of regularity. There is therefore scarcely any species of writing, of which we can tell what is its essence, and what are its constituents: every new genius produces innovation, which, when invented and approved, subverts the rules which the

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<sup>1</sup> As this article is based on the chapter of a book, not yet published, it is necessary to set it in a much wider context – that of the interrelation of fact and fiction in documentary works. As other articles (please see Ramsden) have been published on the same book, there has been some degree of overlap in explaining the context, though the main focus of the articles is obviously different. The title of the forthcoming book is: *Fictional Frontiers: The Interrelation of Fact and Fiction in Modern French Documentary Works*.

practice of authors had established. (Samuel Johnson)

This article looks at the interrelation of fact and fiction between the world and the text, beginning with a discussion of how fictional elements can be found in the real world and how this world is translated into fictional and factual discourses. This leads to an analysis of the complex differences between factual and fictional narratives and the way they deal with reality in their texts, particularly documentary works. Historical works, factual and fictional, taken mainly from the nineteenth century, will be used as an illustration of these ideas. The following paragraphs show the background to this discussion.

The twentieth century saw a proliferation of works which questioned the various written narrative modes of factual and fictional discourses – *What is History?*, *What is Literature?* The titles of other works – *Fables of Fact*, *The Mythopoeic Reality* – which themselves read as paradoxes, bear testimony to the confusion which existed in that era, not only on the borders which traditionally separate these same genres, but also those separating the empirical world from the domain of the text. The accumulation of discourse on discourse, the numerous transgressions which have led to the appearance of many hybrid texts – the nonfiction novel – are evidence both of a search for clear margins and, at the same time, of the awareness of the ever greater difficulty of arriving at such definitions.

The problem is heightened by the wide-ranging meanings of the terms involved – fact and fiction. Fiction can refer to a process of shaping discourse (poiesis), to the practice of invention and feigning, and to a particular system of relations existing within a given text and how it relates to the real world, which mark it out as a work of fiction in a particular era. Facts are mental constructs, products of nineteenth century positivism, which depend both on the shaping, interpretive power of the human mind, and also on a context - social, discursive and epistemological - to give them meaning. Even what was considered as true rather than invented in discourse before the nineteenth century, differed according to the historical era.

Boundaries separating factual and fictional discourse depend on complex issues of epistemology, literary traditions, and also social and political constraints. This is also the case with the work of nineteenth-century historians. The object in this article is not to prove the truth of factual works in any one era. It is enough that these works were accepted as authoritative by the readers of their time, though the particular factors relating to nineteenth-century historical works will be examined. There will also be an analysis of a nineteenth-century factual and fictional history in order to provide examples of the interrelation of factual and fictional elements in these works and to show how fiction finally maintains its own distinction (Cohn, 1999).

The boundaries separating factual from fictional narratives have not always been clear in different historical eras. In the seventeenth century, for example, the number of transgressions of boundaries was such that Bayle (1697), referring to the factual elements adopted by fictional histories, stated in his *Dictionnaire philosophique et critique* that: ‘le mélange de la vérité et de la fable ... fait que l’on n’ose croire ce qui est au fond croyable’.

Cohn (1999) points to postmodernism and its role in attempting to blur these boundaries in the twentieth century. In the area of history, which will be discussed in detail at a later point, Rigney (1990) points out that, although history, before the nineteenth century, had been seen as problematic as a genre, or simply as a branch of literature, in the nineteenth century it had established itself as a discipline in its own right, quite separate from fictional works. It was only in the twentieth-century that historical works again became problematic in works such as that of Norman Mailer and his *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel: The Steps of the Pentagon, and The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon* (1967).

### Story-Shaped World

The discussion will now examine the fictional elements present in our experience of everyday

‘reality’ in our ‘story-shaped world’ (Wicker, 1975).<sup>2</sup> Studies which deal with the relation between art and life tend to focus on the modes of incursion of the empirical world into the written text. However, the merging of realms does not simply take place on this level; elements of art can also be seen to permeate life. Although the twentieth century might be said to show a heightened awareness of the fictional quality of life, this dimension of consciousness is not a modern phenomenon. The many references to life as a dream or as a stage in seventeenth century texts, such as *La vida es sueño* and *Macbeth*, translate the feeling of life as an unreal or fictitious experience. In the seventeenth century this was in fact due to the loss of faith in a providential or, in Auerbach’s term, a ‘figural’ vision of history, which had endowed life with a sense of purpose and concreteness (Auerbach, 1946). The twentieth century, according to Zavarzadeh, who writes about the nonfiction novel, has experienced a similar sense of the unreal quality of the ‘real’ world. This has arisen both from the high level of technology, which has greatly extended the boundaries of the probable, and the impact of the media, which have bombarded audiences with tales of the bizarre and the ‘stranger than fiction’:

The scientific discoveries of the recent past have overthrown the traditional views of facts as the understandable, tame, verifiable, and familiar sunny core of reality, which provide a touchstone for man’s experience of the external world, and instead have revealed them to be as wild, indeterminate, arbitrary, dark, and elusive as the most outrageous fantasies of speculative fiction. What used to be almost universally recognized as fictional and associated with the conjured illusion of reality in novels has now become an empirical fiction surrounding us.

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<sup>2</sup> This sub-title forms part of the title of Brian Wicker’s work, *The Story-Shaped World: Fiction and Metaphysics, Some Variations on a Theme*, 1975.

(p. 21)

Fiction, in the sense of shaping, also contributes to forming our experience of the external world. The image of the ‘windows of the mind’ is a common means of expressing the concept of the different frames which mediate between the world and man’s apprehension of that world, as seen in the following quotation by Davis:

What can we know? or what can we discern?  
 When *Error* chokes the windowes of the mind,  
 The diverse forms of things, how can we learne,  
 That have bene ever from our birth-day blind? ...  
 My selfe am Center of my circling thought ...

(Davis, 1876, pp 15-24.)

The necessary building of frames in order to conceptualize experience is itself an essentially poetic process. At the most basic level of perception, philosophers such as Berkeley, Kant and Hume have shown how, owing to the importance of the work of the imagination in all perception and knowledge of the world, any frame has a deep fictional base: There is ‘no world to be understood without a prior imagining construct’ (Warnock, 1976, p. 71).

In addition, in the twentieth century, life can be said to have entered the framework of the text in a more profound way. Epistemological changes, described by writers such as Foucault, have made it possible to view the empirical world itself as a text, a fictional construct consisting of various systems of discourses– for example, social, scientific, mythical – which man creates in answer to his existential needs. Attempts by Barthes to highlight, or demythologize the artificial nature of such systems are seen in a work such as his structural analysis of the spectacle of a wrestling match, viewed in literary terms. Barthes thus illustrates, in an area related to discourse, one more example of the transgression of

realms:

On vient au catch pour assister aux aventures renouvelées d'un grand premier rôle, personnage unique, permanent et multiforme comme Guignol ou Scapin, inventif en figures inattendues et pourtant toujours fidèle à son emploi. Le salaud se dévoile comme un caractère de Molière ou un portrait de La Bruyère, c'est-à-dire comme une entité classique, comme une essence, dont les actes ne sont que des épiphénomènes significatifs disposés dans le temps... (Barthes, 1957, pp. 20-21.)

One of the most basic and pervasive aspects of life, which is most commonly associated with fictional texts, is that of storytelling. Yet narrative is also an essential means of making sense of the real world. Hardy (1968, p.5) describes narrative as 'a primary act of mind transferred to art from life'. The use of the narrative occurs in all our contact with life – in remembering the past, anticipating the future, and in constructing our fantasies. The way in which we conceive of other people, by composing portraits of them, is also part of the process: 'Qui reconnaît-on en nous sinon un personnage de roman?' (Sollers 1968, p. 228). Narrative can be seen as an important mode of apprehension and communication – an important part of our experience in the empirical world.

#### Drafting the Real – the Necessary Concept of Verisimilitude in Factual and Fictional Discourses

The article will now deal with the issues concerned with translating the world into factual and fictional discourses, remembering that the empirical world is itself a convention. Commenting on the conventional nature of reality in the real world, Zavarzadeh (1976, p. 193) says: 'The reality of the outside world is a conventional reality in that the members of the community agree to regard certain events as real: 'The *New York Times* has told us so we

should know'. The focus is now on the concept of verisimilitude which can be perceived as a necessary concept in the translation of the world into both fictional and factual texts.

Verisimilitude is defined in the Webster dictionary as 'the appearance of truth, probability, realism'. It is a term commonly attributed to the production of an acceptable image of reality in fiction, and as such is closely linked to the notion of mimesis – the imitation of life in art. However, despite the long practice of reserving the notion of verisimilitude for fictional works, the concept plays an equally important role in the drafting of the real in factual works.

The world we perceive with our senses is a social and historical construct acceptable to a particular age. The process of accommodation needed to translate the text of life into factual and fictional texts must produce a paradigm recognizable and acceptable to the age, otherwise the work (although sometimes recuperated at a later date) will not be understood (Riffaterre, 1979, p. 22). This lesson is learnt by the hero of *Le Petit Prince*, whose drawing of a boa devouring a large animal does not correspond to the paradigm of 'les grandes personnes,' who fail to understand his drawing:

J'ai montré mon chef-d'œuvre aux grandes personnes et je leur ai demandé si mon dessin leur faisait peur. Elles m'ont répondu: 'pourquoi un chapeau ferait-il peur?' (Saint-Exupéry, 1953, pp 411-12).

Given the historicity of verisimilitude, the notion of verisimilitude of one age may, in retrospect, seem to be out of step with the 'realities' of another age. The concept of chivalry, which coloured the Middle Ages, was rather an ideal than a real picture of the social norms of the age. Nevertheless, it was for long accepted as verisimilar. It represented the image which society had shaped of itself. However, at a later date it lost its status as a socially acceptable vision of reality.

In fictional texts the range of vision covered by the term ‘realism’, which in its most general sense overlaps with verisimilitude, can be said to extend from early experimental texts such as *Don Quixote*, to the more recent twentieth-century focus on the ‘mythopoeic reality’. The new concept of the nonfiction novel arises from an attempt to find a paradigm to accommodate a new experience of reality – that of the ‘empirical fiction’ or ‘fictuality’ of the real world – which can no longer be accommodated in the old forms of factual or fictional discourses (Zavarzadeh, 1976, p. 56).

Rather than being a seemingly direct translation of the real into the text, the image of the real presented in factual and fictional texts is often influenced as much by a dialogue with other texts, often belonging to another age, as by the writer’s attempts to imitate the external world. As Barthes expresses it, putting even greater emphasis on the importance of literary traditions:

L’artiste ‘réaliste’ ne place nullement ‘la réalité’ à l’origine de son discours, mais seulement et toujours, si loin qu’on puisse remonter, un réal déjà écrit, un code prospectif, le long duquel on ne saisit jamais, à perte de vue, qu’une enfilade de copies (Barthes, 1970, p. 173).

Not all aspects of the real at a particular period are acceptable even in fictional texts. They must remain within the limits set by opinion and convention. Some aspects of our experience in the real world are considered too trivial, too extravagant or simply do not conform to any ‘genre’ readily available. The real of life and of art do not always coincide in the notion of verisimilitude. Although, for example, the Nero of history did murder his mother, this action was felt, in the seventeenth century, to be unacceptable in a drama; it was too extravagant, and the extraordinary is reserved for life. Thus, in the nineteenth century, both factual and fictional histories on the subject of the French Revolution had to conform to the reader’s vision of the reality of history, which had been passed down by written, often

eyewitness accounts, memoirs and physical traces such as monuments, which added up to how the majority saw the main events of the revolution.

This discussion of the phenomenon of verisimilitude has shown that, despite the differences in the way the real is finally presented in factual and fictional discourses, there are many similarities in the process involved in constructing these two paradigms, which appear to exist in opposition to one another. Both factual and fictional forms of discourse require a choice of material from reality, or a reflected view of reality found in earlier texts, which itself conforms to accepted norms of the truth, the 'social real'. In addition, both discourses must mould their material into conventional paradigms which, in essence, have no direct correlation with their object. For both fact and fiction, the concept of verisimilitude is the necessary illusion for translating the real.

#### The Reader and the Narrator in Factual and Fictional Works.

In relation to translating the real world into texts and in accepting a certain way of depicting it, what is the importance of the reader and the narrator - particularly in relation to the form and content of factual and fictional works (See Ramsden, 1990)? The reader's expectations and judgments will be dictated largely by the episteme of the age and the literary conventions of the time – the way that factual and fictional works are felt to relate to the empirical world. The laws of this encoding must therefore be shared and understood by both the writer and the reader.

As shown in the section above the acceptance by the reader of a particular way of transcribing both the factual and the fictional in written works involves the concept of verisimilitude. In order to enable the reader to decode a factual or fictional work in a particular genre, and belonging to a particular age, a work will usually exhibit clear generic signals. The reference to autobiographical writing and a recognized author on the cover of a book enables the reader, for example, to define both the genre and the factual nature of the

work. However, such generic signs can be ambiguous. Sometimes the reader may mistake or be confused by the generic signals of a text which represents a new way of presenting experience. An example would be the twentieth-century factual novel, Mailer's *Armies of the Night* with its subtitle: – *History as a Novel: The Steps of the Pentagon, and The Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon* (1968). In this novel the fictional account of events, perceived, as more personal and subjective than the objective account, is seen by the author as more real than the factual presentation of events. Though finally classed by the author as a novel, this work can be read as a work of contemporary history, of New Journalism, or as a nonfiction novel.

Conversely the reader may collude with the pretence of the fictional writer who presents his work, often in the preface, as 'true' – a situation found in the eighteenth-century novel in a period when the term fiction was often synonymous with lies. In order to emphasize the 'factual' nature of their works, eighteenth-century writers of fictional tales often posed as editors or translators and insisted, in prefaces, on the documentary nature of their work. The factual travel writers of the eighteenth century and earlier purported to have a special contract of authenticity with the reader. Gabriel Foigny, for example, posed as the editor of his *La Terre Australe connue ... par M. [Jacques] Sadeur* of 1676. This was in fact a fictional work, and probably seen as such by the reader, despite the pretence of the author.

Leaving aside the emphasis on the reader, what is the role of the writer/ narrator in factual and fictional texts? Chatman (1978, p.194) refers to the implied narrator who must necessarily be present in all writing and must be separated from the empirical self when s/he takes on the role of a narrating self. This persona must also be distinguished from the foregrounding of a presenter of a tale as in autobiography. In addition a fictional or factual narrator must also exist in discourse in order to translate the world in a distinctive way into different texts.

In written discourse as also in our perception of the world, reality – which is necessarily filtered through the writer’s own personal viewpoint – is subject to distortions both at the level of interpretation and of presentation. Writers are also often led to include the subjective, the imaginative and the anecdotal. Such a vision is never entirely absent even from factual discourse. In factual travel tales of the eighteenth century this intervention was particularly evident as the writer wanted both to impress the reader and to entertain him as much as to inform him.

The writer’s choice of material and its factual or fictional quality will again depend on the accepted paradigms of an age and the final definition of the work will owe much to the use of such material in the work. Both factual and fictional histories contain facts which are taken from the empirical world, but it is the use which is made of these facts by the writer which contribute to the work’s definition. Thus the way in which a writer of factual or fictional history might marshal his facts, in order to create a story of History or a Story of history, is of importance. In addition, in a fictional work the narrator who has created this world can be omniscient and there need be no gaps in his knowledge of events or of the actions and even the thoughts of his characters. However, in factual accounts there may be gaps in the narrator’s knowledge as some events have not been recorded. Thus a historian can either admit a lack of knowledge of certain events or use imaginative conjecture to complete his account. Cohn (1999, pp. 150-51), discussing Tolstoy’s nineteenth-century fictional history, *War and Peace*, believes that the narration of an historical event by a fictional character who is part of, or a witness to, an event, is closer to the truth than historical narrative which cannot normally know the thoughts and inner experiences of a true character in history. Thus a narrator of fictional history can give the reader a more immediate sense of historical events than the factual narrator: '[F]iction enables a writer, first and foremost, to

render historical happenings by way of the personalized and momentary experience of individual human beings' (Cohn, 1999, p. 151).

The translation of the Real World into Different Discourses.

*The writer and the translation of the world into factual paradigms*

Taking a closer look at the texts themselves, how is the real world translated into factual and fictional discourses? By a process similar to that in which daily experience is framed for the purpose of conceptualizing it, linguistic models or paradigms are constructed which correspond to the factual and fictional frames which isolate areas of knowledge. They come into being through an imaginative leap which leads to a new area of consciousness, a different way of relating to the world and experience. Thus factual works, as well as fictional works, have a basic element of fiction at the level of their imaginative conception and construction - that of poiesis: 'All writing, all composition is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poiesis. No recording. Only constructing' (Scholes, 1975, p 7). In addition, as noted above, the factual work cannot escape the personal viewpoint of the narrator. Thus all perception and all written texts humanize and distort reality.

The newspaper serves as an example of the way the empirical world is translated into factual works. The news which appears in the newspaper consists of a reading of reality accepted in large part by the public. Social reality is divided up according to certain acceptable fields, equivalent to the literary genres – for example, history, politics, journalism. Each has its own particular form, felt to be appropriate to the translation of different experiences or fields of knowledge.

The narrative, used in several factual paradigms, including histories, is a common means of relating to the world in everyday life; it is not, however, a natural form. Similarly,

facts ‘do not speak for themselves’; they are conventional constructs (Bruce, 1984, p 155).

The selection and structuring of facts to form a story about the external world is also a form of poiesis. Thus factual works cannot escape elements of fiction.

*The Incursion of Fact into the Fictional Universe*

The discussion will now consider the way in which facts drawn from the real world are used in fictional works and whether they change their nature in such works. There are two basic attitudes towards the relation of art to life – that of the reductionalists for whom literature is grounded in life, and that of the formalists who emphasize the notion of art as artifact, as a purely aesthetic experience belonging to an autonomous realm (White, 1978, p 103). These opposing views are important, both in the consideration of the extent to which the realms of fact and fiction can be said to merge, and also in relation to the status of the elements introduced into the opposing realm. They also shed light on the differences between factual and fictional works, and most importantly here, historical texts.

The formalists see art as an autonomous realm which could not support the presence of ‘real’ elements from the external world. According to their perspective a novelist is not concerned with real people in the empirical world but only with his own fictional world. Factual elements once grafted onto the fictional text, where they establish new relationships, largely relinquish their former connections with the empirical world. There is no necessary and fixed relation between the linguistic representation of reality and reality itself. Some critics, such as Cohn, consider that facts, once transposed into a fictional history, lose their link with actual historical events. According to Cohn’s point of view (1999, pp. 112-113), factual historical works are ‘committed to verifiable documentation and [...] this commitment is suspended in fiction’ This idea obviates the problem of the status of the ‘factual’ elements in the novel as they, like the fiction, belong to a nether region.

In a counter argument, which would support the view of the reductionalists, it is useful to refer to Barthes's argument (1968, pp 84-89) concerning the factual elements found in a fictional text which, though lacking a direct role in the narrative, are introduced in order to create 'l'effet du réel'. The fact that certain novels – for example *Germinie Lacerteux* and *Le Rouge et Le Noir* – have been based on real incidents (in this case a *fait divers*) further suggests a need for the examination of the status and the role of factual elements in fiction.

*Moby Dick* includes several chapters on the whaling industry which, as McCarthy points out (1960, pp 447 & 449), read as non fiction, and can have documentary value. The inclusion of references to real people and places is of particular importance in an historical or social novel. It would seem to necessitate a retaining of the factual status of these elements from the real world, which situate the reader in a particular time and space and create expectations in relation to the factual elements with which the writer of fiction must work. Realist works such as Balzac's novels, seem to highlight their connection with the real world in the many references to dates and public or historical figures and events which they contain. The references to historical figures, such as Napoleon, are important for the repercussions which their actions had in life, though they may not be the focus of the author's narrative when translated into art. The myth and power of Paris, felt in a very real way by inhabitants of the city, and by its visitors, is a central part of Balzac's 'history' of contemporary manners. In addition, it can be argued that the factual elements introduced into fictional histories are still documented and verifiable.

Therefore the author would argue that a direct correspondence or contiguity between art and the real world must be maintained in these works, especially documentary works. Thus, as we have seen above, all fictional works contain elements from the real world and all factual works contain an element of poesis. It is not therefore possible to draw any firm line

between the text as autonomous and the text as worldly – elements of both fact and fiction can be found in both types of discourse.

The story of History/ history as Story: The Interrelation of Fact and Fiction in Historical Discourse and the Distinction between them.

Having examined elements of fiction in our everyday world and how this reality is translated into texts, the focus of the discussion will now turn to the specific case of nineteenth-century factual and fictional historical works. Michelet's *Histoire de la révolution française* (Michelet, 1847), which was accepted as factual, according to the literary conventions and epistemology of the time, will be used for analysis. It will be contrasted with fictional histories and, in particular, Balzac's *Les Chouans* (1834). One aim of the discussion is to illustrate the different levels at which elements from the opposing realm operate in both factual and fictional discourses. Thus fictional techniques are to be found in factual histories and historical facts form part of fictional histories, leading to the production of a story of History or of history as Story. Documentary works, for example history and autobiography, are particularly interesting in that they often appear to cross the borders of differentiation in the complex interplay in these texts between factual and fictional elements and their different uses of the discursive paradigm. However, the main aim of the discussion will be to see how fictional works maintain what Cohn (1999) describes as 'The Distinction of Fiction,' although this article takes a different view of this distinction.

Factual Histories.

The article focuses first of all on the area of factual historical discourse. It examines the particular paradigm used by nineteenth-century historical works - the narrative form of discourse, and the object of their inquiry or story, the factual data belonging to the past.

The emphasis will be on the historians Lamartine, Blanc and especially Michelet who, about the time of the 1848 revolution, took the events of the Revolution 1789-94 as their subject

(Rigney, 1990).

These historians believed the factual content of their works gave them authority, an authority also accepted by the nineteenth-century reader (Rigney, 1990, p. 71). Their intention was to correct what they perceived as the distortions of past works on this subject. In the eighteenth century history was still a branch of literature and Voltaire sought above all a 'beau sujet' for his historical writings<sup>3</sup>. However, their belief in the truth value of their works did not prevent some historians from inventing material. For example, Lamartine, in his history of the Girondins, 1847, recounted a visit to the imprisoned leader of this group by his brother-in-law, accompanied by his young son. Much of the account was made up and was later challenged by the son (Rigney, 1990, p. 20). However, Lamartine did not change the invented details of the episode, which was based on fact, as it fitted in with his portrayal of these particular events. In addition, this invention did not prevent his work from being seen as factual.

The nineteenth-century historians show their consciousness of the type of discourse they have chosen and how their ideas are presented. For example, they often discuss their histories in the texts themselves, often as a preface. Michelet, in his introduction to his history on the French revolution, began with a definition of the revolution: 'Je définis la Révolution, l'avènement de la Loi, la résurrection du Droit, la réaction de la Justice (1952, p. 21). He also speaks to his reader about his ideas on history and its importance in his prefaces of 1847 and 1868. The reader is also addressed in apostrophes, so the presence of the writer and his personal viewpoint is made known by the historian to point the way for the reader to a correct interpretation of the events (Rigney, 1990, p.65). The reader thus feels like an eyewitness to such events (Rigney, 1990, p. 77). In addition, history is seen by these historians as unproblematic – being both knowable and susceptible of being translated directly into

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<sup>3</sup> A term of M. R. Pomeau (1964), quoted by Ehrard and Palmade, in *L'Histoire*, pp 27-8.

discourse (Rigney, 1990, p. ix).

These historians also showed leanings towards a scientific approach. They believed in doing research and examined written records, physical records such as monuments, eyewitness accounts and memoirs as well as past histories. They often included footnotes to show their sources. They did not usually include bibliographies as they felt this would detract from the vividness of their account. However, in their works, events do not necessarily have to be verifiable as long as they are verisimilar (Rigney, 1990, p. 31-2).

Though the works of Michelet, Blanc and Lamartine were accepted as factual historical accounts, their chosen paradigm involved elements of fiction in its creation and construction – an example of poiesis. In addition, the main elements of the historical paradigm – narrative and the past as record – can lead historians to use techniques close to those of fiction. As White points out (1978, p 125): ‘The process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensional totality capable of serving as the *object* of a representation is a poetic process.

These historians are not simply translating the outside world they belong to into their works in a manner which is acceptable to the reader, they are dealing with past actuality which they can never actually experience. In addition, history as ‘past actuality’ consists of all the past, including the fleeting moment and a multitude of simultaneous happenings whereas narrative is usually linear (Rigney, 1990, p. 64). The past is also, by its very nature, out of reach, impossible to experience and to verify directly. Much of the potential field has been lost and what remains is only knowable through the memory and through the evidence of particular documents and monuments and eye witness accounts - ‘history as record’ (Mettra, 1972, p. 5).

Documentation involving history also necessitates an interpretive approach similar to that used for a literary text, for ‘historical documents are not less opaque than the texts

studied by the literary critic' (White, 1984, p. 17). Any attempt to recapture and understand the past must always entail an imaginative leap to achieve a sense of identity with the past. It is not possible to reproduce the past, only to interpret it.

In addition, the past does not consist of the historical facts and events as seen in a work of history. Events and actions, as they are lived, are purely contingent from the point of view of the actors. Historical facts or events are mental constructs which only assume significance in retrospect when perceived from a particular viewpoint, and set in a wider future context (Egan, 1978, p. 82). The dates 1066 and 1815 are seen as memorable because of the importance later attributed to the military conquests which took place at those times (Carr, 1961, p.5). Fabrice, in *La Chartreuse de Parme*, after his confused experience of war, is surprised to discover that he has taken part in the momentous battle of Waterloo (Hughes, 1985, p. 74).

Therefore, there is always a gap between the fullness of the past as lived and the constructed historical event or fact. Reality offers at once too many details, and too few, to enable the historian to describe and fully explain people and events in the past. (White, 1973, p. 281). Thus, within this perspective, events which might distort the overall picture of the past are omitted. As only certain facts, like those of time and place, can be empirically verified, any doubts or gaps in the knowledge available to the historian must be compensated for by imaginative conjecture in order to achieve narrative coherence.

In addition, the nature of history does not lie in a simple compilation of facts about the past, preserved in documents and in the public memory. In this respect, it differs from annals, which are little more than a list of seemingly unconnected events, and from chronicles, where events are formed into a narrative, but without any sense of the significance of the whole. A strong characteristic of modern historiography has been that history requires an explanation of the past which is brought about, not only by careful selection on the part of

the historian, but by a linking of events to achieve a teleological narrative form. The historian must therefore play an important interpretive role and construct a particular story of history in a manner similar to that of the novelist. Thus certain elements are highlighted, others left in the background, still other events are seen as causes or effects, or points of climax. At the narrative level, the factual paradigm thus comes very close to that of fiction.

As Rigney points out (1990, p. 173), the sources the historian uses and the way he incorporates them into his work show his particular image of history. The principal historians who wrote about the years 1789-94 at the same time, Blanc, Lamartine and Michelet, all told different stories about the French revolution, according to their political leanings. However, all were accepted as true accounts (Rigney, 1990, p.39). Thus different stories of history are produced with the use of the same facts, according to the writer's 'narrative strategies' (Nadel, 1984, p. 3). All these stories were extracted from what Rigney (1990, p. 38, note) describes as the 'master narrative' of the years 1789-94 - the mixture of fact and myth accepted by the public and the reader as a representation of the reality of the revolution. In other words it is a verisimilar view of history, as noted above. Also historical accounts themselves exist in a 'situation of historicity', so that stories told about an historical event in one era may be different from the accounts of historians in an earlier or later era (Ricoeur, 1980, p 64).

The factual historians in question thought of works of the eighteenth century as dull and artificial and believed the past should be resurrected in a vivid way to bring history alive for the reader. They also, including Michelet (1952, I. 7), saw the people, rather than royalty, as the main character and described details such as clothing which, up to this point, had not been considered as the stuff of history (Rigney, 1990, p. 151). In addition, in order to achieve their aim of a vivid account, these historians are not averse to using what were considered as fictional techniques, such as narrative, the vivid portrayal of character, the setting forth of

motives, the building of dramatic scenes or what Rigney (1990, pp. 78-9) describes as ‘tableaux vivants’. ‘Happenings’ become ‘events’, ‘people’ become ‘characters’ or even ‘heroes’, a haphazard series of events becomes significant and takes on the form of a plot which brought history to life. These historians also used metaphors – a long way from the transparent language or *écriture blanche* described by Barthes and more often associated with twentieth-century histories (Rigney, 1990, p. 43). One of the dramatic scenes used by Michelet will be examined in the following analysis.

The episode chosen for analysis from Michelet’s *Histoire de la révolution française* (*chapter IX, Le peuple ramène le roi à Paris, le 6 octobre, 1789*), is emplotted as an epic drama (Michelet, 1952, pp. 275-76). Lafayette is seen in the role of the hero who has all the qualities of a knight – courage, a sense of honour, and chivalry. Rather than showing the diffuseness of life, the episode is highly patterned in the manner of a fictional narrative in order to achieve a particular end. The principal protagonists – the royal family, Lafayette, and the people of Paris – make up a symbolic triangle, representing the oppressor, the intermediary or moderate voice, and the oppressed. The scene is vividly brought to life by means of an imaginative projection on the part of the author – what Michelet himself describes as a ‘resurrection’ of the past. Part of the narrative is in the historic present and fragments of direct speech (usually associated with fiction) are also used for immediacy. The scene is viewed as spectacle – a series of dramatic actions built into an atmosphere of sustained tension and suspense. The building of character and the setting forth of motives underline the anecdotal nature of the presentation and engage the reader in an imaginative involvement with the characters, rather than maintaining the necessary critical distance more commonly found in more recent factual works.

The nineteenth-century literary critic, Taine (1892, pp. 98, 109 & 111), expresses his admiration for the vividness of the presentation in Michelet’s work, but goes on to express

doubts about the possibility of reconciling this element with factual accuracy. However, as we have seen, such histories were generally accepted as factual by the readers of the time.

### Fictional Histories.

Michelet and his fellow historians saw fictional histories as simply a fictional version of their own factual works (Rigney, 1990, p.12). Cohn (1999, p. 12) defines fiction as ‘a literary nonreferential narrative text’. However, this view will ultimately be challenged by the author of this article who feels that Cohn’s distinction between factual and fictional histories does not go far enough. The author, unlike Cohn, considers that the term fiction encompasses, as we have seen, other concepts than mere invention set against the real or the true (Cohn,1999, pp 11-12). More importantly the author believes that the difference between these texts is much more radical and entails a very different use by a writer of fiction of the factual paradigm.

Unlike the novelists of the eighteenth century whose work was often perceived as lies, those of the nineteenth century no longer felt the need to pretend, in a preface, for example, that their work was in fact true. However, it was only towards the end of the eighteenth century that literary realism was accepted by readers (Cohn, 1999, p. 3). By the nineteenth century the novel, including the historical novel, had established itself as a separate genre with different aims and possibilities, such as a personal experience by an historical character of an historical event as discussed above. This special view of historical events is not normally possible in factual histories.

In addition, nineteenth-century novelists saw themselves as contributing a different truth to that contained in factual works. Sir Walter Scott, the father of the modern historical novel, though he based his Waverly novels on documentation, sought a broader truth – that of the spirit of the age – than that of directly verifiable historical data. Fictional history can be seen as a supplement to history, marking out new areas of historical investigation. Balzac

sees himself as a social historian in his novels (*Avant-Propos, Comédie humaine*, 1842). His work and that of Scott demonstrate that the task of the novelist, as Oscar Wilde expresses it, is not to acquire ‘careless habits of accuracy’, but to explore different levels of experience from those found in factual historical accounts (Peter Gay, 1974, pp. 9-10). Thus the definition of a fictional nineteenth-century history is far more complex than that of a nonrepresentational text proposed by Cohn.

The historical novel uses a paradigm closely resembling the nineteenth-century factual histories studied here - that of a narrative and historical facts (though some invented material is added). However, as Cohn points out, the fictional historian has much greater licence with his material and the use he makes of the narrative. Looking at the relation of the real of fiction with the outside world, does the factual material in fictional histories become, in Hamburger’s term, ‘fictionalized’? (1973, p. 113) As argued earlier, if this were the case, Barthes’ idea of ‘l’effet du réel’ would be meaningless. Also, unless the reader accepts a direct relationship between the work of fiction and the past as actuality and as record, the importance of history in the novel is greatly diminished and loses much of its meaning, together with the new level of history it deals with.

But how and to what extent have the facts in a historical novel such as *Les Chouans*, been adapted to suit the purposes of the novelist? The authentic details include allusions to Napoleon, to the Chouans (the revolutionary inhabitants of Brittany), including details of their way of life and mode of fighting, to the Blues (the republican army), and general allusions to the military and political situation of the times. There are also more general historical details which serve to translate the spirit of the age – the political, social and psychological forces which characterized this period of history. However, it is the particular use that the writer of fiction makes of these facts which sets him apart.

Major historical characters and events are usually placed in the background in historical novels since knowledge of them is too great to allow for the imaginative reworking of the historical material by the novelist. If well-known historical figures are used, the action which forms the narrative is usually such as has not been recorded by the historian – it belongs to the realm of the speculative rather than actually going against known historical data: ‘It would require a particularly happy accident for the well-known and attested actions of a familiar historical figure to correspond to the purposes of fiction’ (Lukács, 1962, p. 168).

On the fictional level, Balzac states in the prologue to the novel that he has made certain modifications in the factual details, for example in the names of the chief protagonists. Other details are obviously invented, and certain characters are drawn from several models. Le Gars, the leader of the Chouans (the revolutionary force), and Mlle de Verneuil, a spy for the opposing side, are raised to the stature of hero and heroine of the novel. Mlle de Verneuil, beautiful, *déclassée*, and bored with her existence, is well suited to her role as a spy and well matched by the aristocratic and daring leader of the Chouans. In addition, in *Les Chouans*,

Importantly, as a writer of a fictional history, Balzac is more interested in the lives of individuals than in the fate of whole societies. As Cohn states (1999, p. 18), ‘History is more often concerned with humanity in the plural than in the singular, with events and changes affecting entire societies, than those affecting the lives of individual beings’. It is the story of the leader of the Chouans, Le Gars, and of Mlle Verneuil of the republican side which is of greatest importance in the fictional narrative. *Les Chouans* is above all a story of love, betrayal and death, which forms the structure of the work and hence the narrative.

A fictional documentary work, such as an historical work, is therefore characterized by the different use it makes of actual historical events and characters and by its focus in its use of the fictional elements such as invented characters. But even more importantly, the fictional work greatly modifies the aspects of the factual paradigm to serve its own ends. Thus the Story of history which is foregrounded in *Les Chouans* is not that of the military battles, but the emotional battles between Le Gars and Mlle Verneuil which are fought for love. Thus a similar paradigm produces a very different story.

Therefore, although Balzac's claim to being an historian dealing with subjects and details not covered by the factual historian is true, the main emphasis in his historical narrative does not conform to the usual aims of an historian. Rather than being engaged in imitating a factual history, Balzac tells a story which is ageless – that of two lovers. By a final paradox, Balzac's emphasis on the atemporal suggests a purpose which is directly opposed to that of the historian, who deals with specific events, clearly located in time. Thus *Les Chouans* reveals itself, in its final orientation, to be ahistorical. It runs counter to the aims of the factual historian.

### Conclusion.

Thus to sum up, fiction, in its broadest sense, permeates our lives and our written discourse. The world around us is interpreted in terms of a story and all discursive paradigms, including factual and fictional histories, owe their existence to a basic element of construction or poesis. The stories told about the revolution of 1789-94 by nineteenth-century historians, which this article has focused on, such as Blanc, Lamartine and Michelet, must conform to the general story accepted by the reading public. This involves, as we have seen above, an element of verisimilitude. Michelet's factual account was accepted as authoritative as the main elements of his account were based on historical facts. Balzac also uses historical facts

in his novel, but these form part of a largely invented account. Both factual and fictional histories contain elements of fiction. In the factual work this is mainly at the level of technique (though the accounts also contain some invention). Historical events must be chosen out of the mass of the historical past and interpreted as they become part of a narrative which, by highlighting some events and even filling the gaps by conjecture, will form a particular story of history which thus always has a highly subjective element. How then does a fictional history maintain what Cohn refers to as its distinction? Is it a mere fictional imitation of a factual history? In a fictional history the historical facts form the background to the invented story. It is not simply what Cohn describes as a non-referential text with some links to the real world. More importantly, the aim of fiction is not to imitate the factual discourse, but to extend the paradigm to suit its own particular ends. Thus in his fictional history, *Les Chouans*, Balzac tells a story which focuses, not on military battles, but on those between two lovers. The historical facts in Michelet's work, though presented in the form of a personal interpretation and choice of events, remain verifiable, and the fictional element is found at the level of technique or composition. The facts therefore constitute a story of *History*. In Balzac's work, it is the fictional element which carries the burden of the tale, whereas the historical details are a mere cloak for the novelist's purposes. The work can therefore more accurately be described as a Story of *history*. In Balzac's historical novel, the focus is on the passions, which are eternal traits of human beings, whereas in factual histories the accepted reality of the past is preserved in discourse. There is therefore, in Cohn's words, a clear distinction between fact and fiction, but this does not lie in a work being referential or not, but in the special use it makes of the paradigm it employs.

The relationship between the factual and fictional narrative was summed up in broad terms by Flaubert, speaking of his historical novel *Salammbô*, which represents a form of imaginative escape into the past, rather than an attempt at historical realism:

...je crois qu'il y a trop de troupiers? C'est l'Histoire, je le sais bien. Mais si un roman est aussi embêtant qu'un bouquin scientifique, bonsoir, il n'y a plus d'Art (Letter from Flaubert to Ernest Feydau, July 15, 1861).

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