History as Something Done in Miss MacIntosh, My Darling

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Essays

Introduction

In this novel a historical reference is almost never a fact. It is an act. A governess uses it as armor, an opium dreamer invites it to tea, a lawyer grieves through it, a suffragette dresses in it, a stranger rewrites it, a sailor wears it on his skin. The philosophy of Radical Immanence describes these acts closely. The reference lists at the end of this book name the people, places, and events. The essays before them show what the novel does with them.

History as Catechism: Reality Is Constructed

See also: Pillar 2 Reality Is Constructed

Chapters discussed: 17, 22

Miss MacIntosh, the Scottish nurse who stands for common sense, quizzes Vera every morning over breakfast in Chapter 22. Where is the sole nesting ground of the Kirtland's warbler, "a species almost extinct, seldom seen in this world"? Who was King Canute? Then she turns to "mortal history" to "consider the mistakes of men, their lack of mature judgment." Her favorite target is the Emperor Constantine, who changed the calendar and "got us all off on the wrong day of the week, resting on Sunday which was the day God had not rested."

Young makes a quiet point with this grievance. A calendar is pure invention, an agreement held in place by repetition, and Miss MacIntosh knows it. She sees the construction in Constantine's week. She does not see it in herself. Chapter 17 has already exposed that the woman of plain facts wore a wig and had "only one breast and no hair and no future prospect." Her rote history was a costume over a body she hid. This is Reality Is Constructed at its sharpest: the person most certain about what is real is standing inside the most carefully built disguise in the book.

History as Hallucination: Not One Self

See also: Pillar 1 Not One Self

Chapters discussed: 11, 14, 30

Catherine Cartwheel lives in opium dreams where history comes calling. Among her guests in Chapter 11 is an Egyptian pharaoh who is "Rameses I, II, III," each wrapping a different and older king. He learns he had been "partitioned into many selves without his knowing it, without his consent," so that "as Rameses III he had dreamed the dreams of Rameses I who was already dead."

This is the clearest statement of Not One Self in the novel, and it arrives disguised as a mummy. A historical name, which seems to be one person, turns out to be a stack of selves dreaming each other. The same pattern runs through the whole cast. Mr. Spitzer cannot be sure whether he is himself or his dead twin Peron. Cousin Hannah is described in Chapter 30 as "being both herself and a gentleman." Young uses history's dynasties and numbered kings because they already admit what her characters discover: one name has always held many.

Catherine also greets Czar Kolokol, king of "the iron bells which, because of an engineering miscalculation, had never tolled" (Chapter 14). Czar Kolokol was never a king. Young chose a monument famous for its silence. The opium world is full of grand history that never quite sounds.

History in the Body: The Past Doesn't Go Away

See also: Pillar 8 The Past Doesn't Go Away

Chapters discussed: 57, 68, 69

In Chapter 57, Mr. Spitzer meets a man reconstructing Appomattox with the outcome reversed, so that "Grant was surrendering to Lee." The man still carries a bullet from the battle in his knee-cap. It aches before rain, and "that was how he knew he lived." Mr. Spitzer quickly calculates that the man would have to be eighty. "There were the impossibilities which Mr. Spitzer recognized in others," Young writes, and the irony lands, since Mr. Spitzer cannot recognize his own.

The scene holds two ideas from the philosophy at once. History is not behind this man. It is lodged inside him, a weather sense in a joint, which is The Past Doesn't Go Away made literal. And by flipping the war's result he shows that the outcome was not the only possible one, and that nothing in history had to happen as it did. The same layering shows up in the sailor of Chapter 68, who claims, "I was on the Titanic. I was on the Lusitania." In Chapter 69 a man carries "Remember the Marne" tattooed on his chest. The past in this novel is written on skin and in bone.

History as Grief: Grief Doesn't End and Witnessing Is The Core Ethical Act

See also: Pillar 3 Grief Doesn't End · Pillar 4 Witnessing Is The Core Ethical Act

Chapters discussed: 22, 49, 63

Chapter 49 contains the most moving historical fact in the book. "Whenever he thought of the death of an individual, he wept for the death of the last passenger pigeon," Martha, who died at the Cincinnati zoo on September 1, 1914 (Young gives September 14, 1919), "dying of dying, dying as the leaf falls." Mr. Spitzer arrives too late with his white rose.

Extinction is the one historical event that cannot be revised, reversed, or dreamed back. Young pairs it with Miss MacIntosh's Kirtland's warbler, almost gone, so that the book's history lessons keep circling loss that stays lost. Mr. Spitzer does not heal from Martha. He carries her into every other grief. That matches Grief Doesn't End closely: grief as permanent weather rather than a stage. Miss MacIntosh voices the other side in Chapter 63: "How shall I show my grief? Shall I tear my hair?" For a bald woman the conventional gesture is impossible. Performed mourning fails her, and what remains is staying with the loss, the stance of Witnessing Is The Core Ethical Act.

History as Costume and Crusade: The Margins Reveal the Truth

See also: Pillar 7 The Margins Reveal the Truth

Chapters discussed: 30, 31

Cousin Hannah is a suffrage captain who travels to Mecca, Medinah, and Fez and speaks of her campaigns as Crusades. Young calls her life "a history of skirts." Her crusading has two faces. Her fight is real, and she sees the rules of gender clearly because she stands outside them, which is The Margins Reveal the Truth. But her borrowed language of holy war is also the grand destiny rhetoric the philosophy distrusts. Young lets both be true. Notably, Hannah felt this mortal life "to be the only life," and yet she scorned it "as something intolerably beneath her dignity just as she had scorned personal immortality" (Chapter 30). She stood near The Sacred Is Here and turned her back on it.

The Umbrella: A Leveller's History

Pillars: Pillar 2 (Reality Is Constructed) · Pillar 10 (The Sacred Is Here)

Chapters discussed: 63

The one historical thread that runs through more than fifty chapters is the umbrella. In Chapter 63, Miss MacIntosh credits Jonas Hanway, who fought for chimney sweeps, with bringing it to England from the East, where it served as "a sign of princely dignity, of the superiority of one man over his fellowman, of the divine rights of rulers and kings." Her verdict is "Balderdash, nonsense," and she praises Hanway as "a fine leveller who lived to triumph over the rich."

This may be the most compact example of Young's method. An object of rank becomes an object of rain. A symbol built to divide people turns ordinary, carried by everyone, and the novel's endless umbrellas become the history of that change. It shows the invented status of royal signs and then brings them down to the actual weather, which is where the philosophy locates meaning.

The Ending: The Sacred Is Here and The Crossing Point

See also: Pillar 10 The Sacred Is Here · Pillar 11 The Crossing Point

Chapters discussed: 63, 82

Miss MacIntosh states the book's turn plainly in Chapter 63: "imagination is nothing. The life is what counts." The final chapter carries this out. Vera, sleeping beside her deaf lover, hears him say, "There be words of ours, he said, not in the alphabet of the stars. Flowers spell them out on the earth." (Chapter 82) After a thousand pages of pharaohs, czars, crusades, and emperors, meaning is found in grass and flowers underfoot. That is The Sacred Is Here almost word for word.

Vera also says, "I do not know the night in which I conceived as I do not know the night in which I was conceived." (Chapter 82) She stands exactly at The Crossing Point, between the generation that made her and the one she carries, with neither origin fully known. Set against Esther Longtree's endless pregnancy that never brings a living child, Vera's conception is the book's one real opening toward a future.

Conclusion

Young used history the way her characters use it: as a disguise, a dream, a wound, a crusade, a rainy day. Read that way, the references form an argument. Official, finished history is one more invention, and the truth of the past lives in bodies, griefs, and ordinary objects. The reference lists that follow name the nouns. The novel's history is made of verbs.

Reference Lists

Historical Figures and Leaders

Chapters discussed: 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, 34, 35, 36, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 49, 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 70, 71, 72, 74, 76, 81

Ancient World

- Rameses I, II, and III (Egyptian pharaohs, one visitor partitioned into many selves), Ch. 11
- Sardanapalus and Ashurbanipal (Assyrian kings), Ch. 30
- Belshazzar (last king of Babylon, a rival of Cousin Hannah), Ch. 39
- Darius the Great (Persian king), Ch. 30, 40
- Pericles (Athenian statesman), Ch. 11, 22
- Aristides the Just (Athenian statesman), Ch. 54
- Alexander the Great, Ch. 40
- Hannibal (Carthaginian general, the Siege of Rome), Ch. 9, 24, 30, 42
- Julius Caesar (crossing the Rubicon, his campaigns, busts with laurel wreaths), Ch. 23, 41, 42, 43
- Cleopatra, Ch. 22, 26, 29, 44, 49, 53, 76
- Mark Antony (spelled Marc Antony or Antony), Ch. 26, 41, 44
- Helen of Troy, Ch. 23, 41
- Emperor Hadrian (the stolen mosaics of his tomb), Ch. 22, 24
- Emperor Constantine (calendar change, conversion to the Church of Rome), Ch. 22, 23, 63, 64, 65, 66
- Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Diogenes with his lantern, Ch. 2, 9, 14, 24, 41, 61, 63
- Archimedes, Ch. 18

Medieval and Renaissance

- Charlemagne (Holy Roman Emperor), Ch. 29, 30, 52
- Roland, killed at Roncevalles, Ch. 11, 30
- Saladin (opponent of the Crusaders), Ch. 30
- Harold Harefoot (English king), Ch. 40
- King Canute (unable to command the tides), Ch. 22, 24, 35, 63
- King Magnus, Ch. 17

- William the Conqueror (spelled Conquerer), Ch. 70
- Mohammed (his horse El-Burraq, namesake of Cousin Hannah's horse), Ch. 30
- Suleiman the Magnificent (spelled Solymon, greatest of the Ottoman sultans), Ch. 30
- St. Augustine, Ch. 3
- St. Simeon the Stylite, Ch. 3, 71
- Martin Luther (a bust of him, his bed), Ch. 19, 21, 29, 53, 66, 72
- Copernicus, Ch. 14
- Marco Polo, Ch. 2
- Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain, Ch. 9, 14, 55, 74
- Montezuma (his tomb), Ch. 54
- Leonardo da Vinci and the Mona Lisa, Ch. 12
- Raphael, Ch. 11, 29
- Benvenuto Cellini, Ch. 2
- Dante, Ch. 2, 40, 71

Early Modern

- Sir Walter Raleigh (who lost his head), Ch. 11, 53
- Ben Jonson, Ch. 2, 13
- Shakespeare, Ch. 18, 24
- Milton (blind, dictating Paradise Lost), Ch. 2
- Mary, Queen of Scots (at golf), Ch. 53
- Louis XIV (at billiards), Louis XIII and Louis XV (as furniture styles), Ch. 53, 54
- Sir Christopher Wren, Ch. 24
- Spinoza, Ch. 24
- Sir Joshua Reynolds (English portrait painter), Ch. 11
- Catherine the Great, Ch. 27, 54
- Diderot (called revolutionary Diderot), Ch. 40
- Jonas Hanway (brought the umbrella to England, fought for chimney sweeps), Ch. 63
- Pocahontas, Ch. 54
- Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin, Ch. 7, 12, 16, 40, 49, 55, 60, 81

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- Napoleon, Ch. 7, 29, 35, 42, 54
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- Keats and Shelley (buried in Rome), Ch. 2, 3, 71
- Benjamin Franklin (flying his kite, blamed for electric light), Ch. 23, 63
- Paul Revere (his midnight ride), Ch. 18, 42
- Daniel Boone (American pioneer), Ch. 40, 70
- Abraham Lincoln, Ch. 6, 64
- General Custer (Custer's Last Stand), Ch. 42
- General Sheridan (Sheridan's March), Ch. 42
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- Robert Peary and Frederick Cook (rivals for the North Pole; Admiral Peary, Commander Peary, and Captain Cook in the novel), Ch. 2, 11, 24, 54, 66
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- John D. Rockefeller, Ch. 66
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- The archduke murdered at Sarajevo (Franz Ferdinand, though not named), Ch. 30, 39, 54
- Czars of Russia (trembling at Cousin Hannah's approach), Ch. 36

Historical Events and Periods

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- Constantine's change to the calendar, Ch. 22
- The Battle of Roncevalles, Ch. 11
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- Paul Revere's ride, Ch. 18, 42
- Slavery and the abolitionists (Egyptian slaves chained to Roman galleys; Mr. Spitzer "a Boston Abolitionist, opposed to human slavery in any form"), Ch. 42, 57
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- The Armistice and the influenza epidemic that followed it, which took old Doc out of medical science, Ch. 8
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- Black and white prizefighters: Mr. Spitzer bets on the black boxer, in the years of Jack Johnson, Ch. 2
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Mythological, Legendary, and Symbolic References

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- "Three souls" (the three souls of Mongolian shamanism), Ch. 29
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- Czar Kolokol, King of the Bells (the silent Tsar Bell of the Kremlin, greeted as a person), Ch. 14, 39, 55, 62

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