

“In Defense of Historical Fiction”: An Unpublished Essay by Edith Simon (Edited, with Introduction and Commentary, by Henry Innes MacAdam)¹

†Edith Simon & Henry I. MacAdam

He [a New Testament Scholar] characterizes the [four canonical] Gospels as “history-like witnesses to truths both historical and transcendent,” which is helpful so long as we do not take “history-like” to mean fictional, in the way that historical novels are “history-like.” [He] maintains that they [the Gospels] are not the kind of narrative about past events that modern historians write.²

Introduction

The essay presented below is the second of two among the personal papers of the late Edith Simon (1917-2003). Although untitled and undated, there is some internal evidence to suggest that it was written c. 1960, nearly a decade earlier than another typescript essay “On Translating Thomas Mann.” That longer and more complicated assessment of the “official” translation of Mann into English appeared under Simon’s name as an article edited, with introduction and commentary, by me.³ It is again my pleasure to assist in publishing an essay by Edith Simon, this time on a topic that illuminates an important aspect of her own publishing history: the genre of historical fiction.

The essay is ten typewritten pages in length, double-spaced on A-4 sheets. On almost every page there are handwritten corrections. Many of these are slash-marks to separate words not spaced properly; others are corrections (e.g. *42nd Parallel* for *39th Parallel*). On the bottom of two pages she wrote the names of authors noted only by their book titles in the text. At the bottom of the last page she printed her name very clearly and underneath it her home address: 7 Rosebery (*sic*) Crescent, Edinburgh. I am told by her daughter Antonia Reeve that the family lived at that address between 1950/51 and 1961. Simon’s essay may be dated between 1952 (see below) and 1962 with certainty.

In a few places, and only for clarification, I have supplied a missing letter or word or placed my editorial remark inside brackets []. Where Simon made a correction longer than one letter or one word I indicate it by **bold** print. She wrote in British English (German was her native language) and her spellings are maintained; in keeping with that I have tried to Anglicise any American English spellings in this Introduction, in the Commentary, and in the Conclusion. In several places I combined two brief paragraphs (on the same topic) into a single paragraph; the joins are indicated by a + sign. Some lengthy paragraphs have been subdivided into two shorter paragraphs; the break in the original is indicated by a # sign.

Though this essay is brief and Simon herself did not sub-divide it, it does invite one to do so. Thus I have taken the liberty to re-cast it in five parts: *Preliminary Remarks*, *General Observations*, *Three Great Historical Novels*, *Excursus: The Craft of the Historical Novelist*, and *Closing Remarks*. These sections are indicated by bracketed bold headings in italics. Edith Simon may not have approved of any of these editorial modifications of her essay, but it is clear that she would have undertaken revisions, and indeed perhaps some expansion of portions, had she gone through with publication. There is no indication in the typescript (other than its brevity) that this was a paper written to be read at a conference or a colloquium, but that possibility cannot be excluded.

Once again I am grateful to Edith Simon's family, in particular to her younger sister Inge Simon Goodwin, and to her (Simon's) daughter Antonia Reeve, for the opportunity to see this essay through the publication process. They have been supportive and encouraging and above all *patient*. Without their help in answering the barrage of questions I presented them with in letters and e-mails (concerning *both* unpublished essays) the editorial process would have been far less productive and indeed, incomplete. If unanswered questions remain regarding this essay, as well as the earlier essay "On Translating Thomas Mann," it is not because they were reluctant to assist me at every turn.

I first made Edith Simon's "acquaintance" as a thirteen-year-old in upstate New York when I read for the first time a paperback re-print of Arthur Koestler's Roman-era novel *The Gladiators*.⁴ On the copyright page was the notation "Translated by Edith Simon." It was the first time I had read any novel in translation, and I did not know the translator was only 21 when she undertook the task. Fifty years later, in preparation for a centenary tribute article about Koestler,⁵ I made contact with Simon's family. As a result her essay on Thomas Mann in English translation, and this one about the value of historical fiction, are now in print. I hope they help to enhance the reputation of their author.

In Defense of Historical Fiction [c. 1960] **[*Preliminary Remarks*]**

What is so reprehensible about reading, and therefore writing, historical fiction? For the term is one of opprobrium, little better if at all than those of "mystery" and "science"—and let no one pretend to believe they are purely straightforward classifications.

Of course all three words have departed some way from their straightforward meaning, which they only retain provided they are not linked with literature. History is more than respectable; mystery a quality rather than a subject, well-regarded since having both poetic and spiritual overtones; as for science, it surely

stands today [c.1960] for everything that is serious and fundamental: Truth, Life, Death: essential humanism, right or wrong.

Yet the term *historical novel* conjures up something between a bawdy house and theatrical costumiers's, the *mystery novel* a chessboard for games in which violence, espionage, and detection are the moves; while the *science novel* has some of the elements of both, transported to a castle in the moon (often literally so), or at all events into the realm of fancy totally beyond check.

It would almost seem that in each case the qualifying word denotes the exact opposite of its meaning in the dictionary. Coupled with that other word, "novel", history, mystery, and science have become synonyms for past, present, and future. Who has ever heard of a historical novel set in the present, a mystery story set in the past, and science fiction dealing with anything but the future?

C.P. Snow's novels, which are about scientists, are not science fiction; [Emily Brönte's] *Wuthering Heights* [1847] is not a mystery novel, John Dos Passos' *42nd Parallel* [1930] is not a historical novel—although any innocent abroad, unfamiliar with the terminology, would think them to be just that. If asked to describe them, one would be at a loss, failing a regular synopsis.

#All one can say off-hand about reputable fiction is that it takes place in the writer's own day (when the writer himself belongs to a previous era, it is sometimes forgotten that for his part he wrote about the past, as for example Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, and Defoe in his *Journal of the Plague Year*) and cannot be fitted in under any specific label. "Problem," "psychological," "romantic", all carry their own disparagement.

[General Observations]

It looks, then, as if it is conformance to category rather than any period factor, which automatically relegates a work of fiction among the lower forms of entertainment. And that is strange; in an age all out for specialization in every field, where people not only like to know beforehand what sort of book they are going to open (I won't say *buy*), but, I am told, resent it if their author betrays them with a different kind from that in which they first made his acquaintance.

Perhaps it is natural that, once the reader has been won and has acquired the taste for a certain dish, he should want the same again. But the same again and yet again can but weary the palate. True, you can read faster that way. The beginning and end of a paragraph soon are all you need to take in to grasp its import, and in time the beginning and end of an entire page will leave you reasonably certain of its contents. It does kill time, no doubt about it. Or it might be of the same order as the fashion for "doing-it-yourself": given the ingredients, you can bake your cake and eat it simultaneously.

One recipe is not in the cookery book: how to make a good novel, let alone a great one, has never been satisfactorily defined. To say that every sentence,

if not every word, should come as a surprise, so that it is necessary to read them all, does not really get us much further. Purveying universal experience in such manner that its impact is fresh as well as startling to the faculty of recognition, also is too vague a dictum to be a rule. There are no standard rules; every book is a microcosm evolving and obeying its own laws. [T]hough subsequent analysis is feasible, it will yield no directives for future use.

As many different books have been written with a “historical” background as there have been on contemporary themes. They range from the sublime to the ridiculous, with enough offshoots in every direction of eccentricity to satisfy both seekers after vigour and decadence—Flaubert’s *Salambô*, Thornton Wilder’s *Ides of March*, Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*, would be among those. We have the expanded-Baedeker kind, as in [Hervey Allen’s] *Anthony Adverse*, or glossaries of antique modes of thought, apparel and domestic gear, such as George Eliot’s *Romola*, first-readers in early Christian lore like [Lew Wallace’s] *Ben-Hur* and [Henryk Sienkiewicz’s] *Quo Vadis?*, [Alexandre] Dumas’ picaresque blood and thunder, Naomi Mitchison’s masochistic daydreams, Thomas Mann’s unplumbable well-of-the-past [*The Joseph Tetralogy?*], Frans Bengtsson’s spirited essay in folk art (*The Long Ships*) — to name only a few variants.

Good or bad, they all share one basic approach. It is that of the scholar, of discovery, even if it may on occasion appear as a naïve caricature of itself: [W]hat! Those people had no plumbing, no pyjamas, they wore hoop skirts and powdered their hair; and the weekly clyster occupied the same place in cultivated and hygienic living as dentist and psycho-analyst do today! And yet they were human, just like us!

There is to this attitude the same sociological curiosity, the same delight in unearthing the odd and incongruous facts which are the stuff of life **in any period**, as motivate the more sensitive and at the same time less romantic practitioners. It is just a question of degree. The historical outlook, whether primitive, academic, or inspired, apprehends its subjects as a panorama of implicit comparisons. For this reason I would include in the *genus* social studies like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *An American Tragedy*, [and] *The Forsyte Saga* (the last two, indeed, advertise their historical nature by their very titles), and many others equally recording a contemporary scene.

As a matter of fact the application of this outlook to the past is of very recent origin. Archaeology had hardly begun in the eighteenth century and did not really get into its stride until the twentieth. Most of the ancient civilizations whose languages were not Latin, Greek, or Hebrew, remained muted and thus largely unknown before the Rosetta [S]tone provided a primary key. Before those dates [i.e. 18th-20th centuries] stories dealing with the past generally did so in a lusty fantastic spirit, untroubled by the cares of accuracy. The past was merely another exotic country where anything might happen. (Vestiges of this happy condition are still discernible in the cloak-and-dagger romance, where also pornography serves

for anthropology).

By the same token, the blackboard-or-textbook epic is something of a newcomer on the scene of historical fiction. It is the work of the teacher, its didactic purpose only sufficiently disguised to sugar the educative pill and get it down the largest number of throats. The purpose is good and the pill can be very agreeable. Nevertheless the result, neither entirely honest nor spontaneous, is seldom successful as a work of art; while the same gifts and scholastic passion, brought to bear on the same subject without the trappings of fiction, will often accomplish just such perfection. Compare *The Man on a Donkey* and [a] biography of Mary Tudor, both by the same author (H.F.M. Prescott). Teaching by means of parable necessarily is too selective to be conducted with unflagging integrity. When there is a lesson to be taught, the truth will have to be adapted to it every now and then, at best continually simplified.

[Three Great Historical Novels: Part 1]

In the whole wide field [of historical fiction] there are for me three works which stand unequaled: *War and Peace* (Tolstoy), *Kristin Lavransdatter* (Sigrid Undset), and *I, Claudius* (Robert Graves). In them research and observation have been most successfully integrated, and transmuted into life. Instead of burdening the tale with excess luggage, instead of being transferred bodily from card index and curio cabinet and note book to the printed page, detail is always used as a point of departure for deduction, pinpointing and elucidating varying stages in man's development. The furniture of his everyday life is allowed as conditioning his thought and feeling, customs influence his actions so that we see quite similar acts "then" and "now" attaining different significance, thus giving us a sense of greater depth, dimension, understanding. It is man who is explored and not his grave—nor merely his bed, the one place where he probably does disport himself forever essentially unchanged.

Which brings me to another question I always want to ask. Why is it more meritorious to sift bones and shards, analyse sexual statistics, climb a mountain or descend into a cave, traverse the desert on a bicycle or cross the Atlantic on a log and write about it afterwards, than to examine the heights and depths and quiddities, the areas of aridity and feats of endurance, of the human soul and human inter-relations—and that *in the act* of writing, creating out of the void where the data spin at haphazard in infinity?

Two possible answers come to mind. One is that, demoralised by the catastrophic threats of Progress, we yearn for evidence of human indomitability, full of nostalgia for a simple courage on which the faculty of imagination acted only as a stimulant instead of a fatal curse. Fiction is not evidence; there is no proof, no reassurance in invented adventures; nostalgia itself becomes rootless, a contradiction in terms, if it cannot hark back to fact. It is then renamed Escape, and

accordingly despised. +Also, if we do by any chance bestow our confidence, we like to feel it has been well and truly earned. We like to see our evidence attested by further evidence of good, honest, hard work, the more the better.

[*Excursus: The Craft of the Historical Novelist*]

So perhaps the historical novel suffers from the assumption that it is too easy [to write]. True, research is a fine thing, as laborious as anyone could wish: but after all, your material is all there, you only have to look it up. Anyone can do it, if only he could spare the time. And you evade the issues of the world around you, withdrawing into “the good old days.” +But you do no such thing. At every step the writer about the past attempts to solve the besetting questions of his own day, in one way or another (for even *Escape* is certainly an attempted solution). He does it obliquely, if you will, but, so long as he works honestly and does not merely concentrate on finding parallels and pointing out an explicit moral, will be the more likely to achieve immunity against that infallible killer of life in art, tendentiousness. Thus, too, he may even encounter less resistance in the minds he wants to convince.

For even if he has no axe to grind, no message whatever, his first and last object will always be suspension of disbelief. That is the only means of holding the reader. Without it there can be no interest, only boredom. Convince, suspend belief in him; then you can bore him as much as you like, for he can always skip. And the reader is far from being only a financial necessity. Ultimately any work of art is the result of a co-operative effort on the part of author and spectator. The painting does not really exist until it is seen, the book until it is read: art is a form of communication; there are no signals in a vacuum.

Difficulty is no guarantee of quality, and the same holds good in reverse. Certainly facility has its dangers, but only when it is taken in the sense of leading to clichés of thought and expression, when formula takes the place of observation. Wonderful works have been produced in their time with no graver birth pangs than occur in the songbird’s throat. The trouble is that with the constant accretion of literature an immense body of clichés has also accumulated, all bearing definite associations which sometimes make it actually cumbersome to avoid using them—as the majority of truly effortless productions belongs to earlier phases of the craft.

It is in this respect that setting your story in the past facilitates the task of seeing freshly and minting words anew, without drawing upon yourself the charge of affectation which otherwise is almost inevitably incurred. But then, the process of discarding a habitual vision and acquiring the use of bygone eyes, which must precede this, is not the easiest thing in the world. +I wonder whether the inception, the starting point of such a novel, is of crucial importance here. It determines [the] quality and degree of the author’s interest in the undertaking before him, and, combined with the particular bent of his talent, will determine

his choice of a particular period. Limitations are to the work of art what the scaffolding is to a building; unlimited choice will lead to confusion of both structure and intent, which no amount of pedagogic vocation and goodwill can pull together into a concentrated whole.

[Three Great Historical Novels: Part 2]

This core of wholeness must be the secret of a recreation of Life, larger than life and yet striking home with poignant verisimilitude, which is the ultimate aim of every novel, no matter which of a multitude of roads to this end it may take. In the case of the three great novels I have named, the points of inception are significantly varied. Dogmatic statements are perilous: but only one of the three authors is still living, able to protest that I have got it wrong. I would say that with regard to his (Robert Graves') masterpiece the person and character of the Emperor Claudius were the seed that fertilized his imagination, provided the spark that electrified his work, the essence that unified its diffusiveness.

#That he happened to be familiar with much of his matter and that there emerged in his tale the endearing **plot** of "Fool Makes Good" was an accident. But [it was a] predetermined accident, if one can call it so, [an] occupational accident: genius too is accident prone in its own line.+Sigrid Undset in *Kristin Lavransdatter*, on the other hand, seems to have been impelled by a deeply affectionate feeling of affinity with a way of life and a morality which, evolved in a certain combination of time and place, in turn gave rise to certain characters illustrating them, and who then took absolute possession of the author. The original impulse was not to instruct, but more like the lover's urge to introduce the object of his passion everywhere.

With Tolstoy the matter was a little more complicated. He saw himself as a teacher but could not help himself creating as he went along, pouring life into whatever he touched. He was like a fake medium unknowingly imbued with genuine powers: gazing into his crystal, whatever the message he had already made up his mind to utter, he saw only what was really there. Whatever and whomever he set himself to invent, they were revealed as true. The lectures scattered throughout the text of *War and Peace*, which at first glance many of us would deplore, do not in effect mar it. They are his excuse and his atonement for the self-indulgence of his phenomenal begetter's urge; they are *his* limitations; and they set off the teeming life he called into being.

#If in this end he did contrive to let the teacher in him choke the creator, this cannot concern us here, since it was many years after *War and Peace* was written. In any event, his teaching was not concerned with factual information, but with certain spiritual values and attitudes of mind he wished to propagate. He was a preacher rather than [a] schoolmaster, a prophet whose sermons took for material what lay readily at hand, and who spoke with tongues. +So much, briefly, for the writer. The motives of his particular public are still more elusive, since the only

concrete clues to them are sales and library figures. However, the reader of novels set in the past is generally accused of predominantly escapist tendencies.

[Closing Remarks]

Admittedly we find security of a kind in a retreat to the past, over and above its freedom from our particular worries. Everything *has* happened, it is over and done with, we know it did not happen to ourselves and therefore [could] not happen, at least in that form. Our sympathy may be released without threat of sleeplessness. (The attraction of the future is as easily explained, although Utopia has ceased to be a place of perfection or impractical reform. We are allowed to jump the cataclysm of which we stand in terror, and see ourselves surviving, not extinct. In the present, considerable relief is to be obtained by reducing fatality to a ritual game, life to a paper chase, where hatred, love, and suffering are no more than gestures, or stage directions we may take as read.)

We want to forget ourselves. We hanker after a taste of unconsciousness without loss of the awareness necessary to enjoy it. The craving is compared to that of the drug addict. But, looked at another way, it may become quite blameless, even laudable, so that we need no longer be ashamed of it in ourselves and decry and persecute it in our fellows. The paralysing fear and despair which make us want to turn our backs on the world we live in, bury our heads in the sand and give up the struggle, flourish in self-centred preoccupation. In egocentricity we are isolated. It is not only that danger becomes more tolerable when it is shared, but it helps to learn to see ourselves in relation to everybody else, one of a crowd, a very large crowd indeed: to see ourselves in proportion.

In the difficult enterprise of seeing and accepting every existing individual as the centre of a universe nothing, surely, is more helpful than a form of Escape that means sinking our own selves in other people's. In the last resort *all* reading is Escape, whether or no[t] the matter be fiction, and so, indeed, is any activity in which one may become absorbed to the exclusion of immediate consciousness of self. Nobody would call mathematics a narcotic, or carpentry.

The historical novel additionally provides a sense of continuity, putting contemporary times into their proper place as part of an unbroken chain of events and developments. Nothing is quite the same viewed on its own and shown in the context where it belongs, be it a colour, a piece of furniture, a law, a person, or an atrocity. Horror is aggravated by seeming unique; tolerance is bound to spring from contemplation of the innumerable diverse forms assumed at different times, in different places, by such concepts as love, honour, and religion; and it is a great comfort to look back and find that in every age the end of the world has been just around the corner.

It is no accident that many of the world's greatest works of fiction were written glancing backward, interpreting the author's own times through a kind of double vision, in perspective. Past and future are always with us, close and normal,

in the shape of yesterday and tomorrow; we cannot leave them out of account even if we would. By denigrating the historical novel we rob ourselves of a thing of great value. Were it merely a question of vindicating its status, one would either not dare or not bother to go to its defense.

Commentary

Some explanatory notes should help the reader by illuminating certain aspects of this essay. These comments are not meant as a substitute for the author's own revision and expansion had she seen it through to delivery at a conference and/or publication. In a few places I have had difficulty understanding what she meant and I offer, in brackets, what seems to me the correct reconstruction. One word of caution regarding sources: the commemorative volume for Edith Simon (*Moderation Be Damned!* see full citation below) does not enumerate the chapters or number the pages. In spite of that I have tried to give an accurate reference to chapter and page (especially in the case of direct quotations from other sources) within the footnotes.

Preliminary Remarks:

“... historical fiction ... the term is one of opprobrium...” Simon's decision to write an article in defense of this genre of literature in no small way grew from her own extensive experience in writing historical novels. *Nine* of the fifteen books she wrote between 1940 (when *The Chosen* appeared) and 1972 (when *The Anglo-Saxon Manner* was published) fall into that category.⁶ *The Chosen*, centered on Moses and the biblical Exodus, was directly influenced by the Thomas Mann tetralogy of novels *Joseph and His Brothers*, the first three of which were in publication by the late 1930s. That connection with Mann, whom Simon could read in German, eventually led to her essay “On Translating Thomas Mann.”

Other novels explored the role of Britain in WW II (*Biting the Blue Finger*, 1942 and *Wings Deceive*, 1944), modern missionaries in China (*The Other Passion*, 1948), and the construction of a medieval castle to house the relics of a Christian martyr (*The Golden Hand*, 1951). The latter was a breakthrough in terms of critical acceptance; one literary pundit later ranked it “with the finest historical fiction of this century.”⁷ At one point Simon contracted to write a “thriller” about a plot to assassinate Queen Elisabeth II. It was rejected by the publisher as a novel unacceptable in Buckingham Palace.⁸

The Past Masters (1953), *The Twelve Pictures* (1955), *The Sable Coat* (1958), and *The Great Forgery* (1962) are also historical novels. One literary critic later rated Simon “one of the few genuinely great historical novelists writing today” in a review of *The Twelve Pictures* (based on the *Nibelungenlied* of German mythology and Wagnerian opera).⁹ Simon's other six books are all non-fiction. They include *The Piebald Standard* (1959), a study of the Knights Templars, *The Making of*

Frederick the Great (1963), *The Reformation* (1966), *The Saints* (1968), the development of early Christianity, *Luther Alive* (1968), and *The Anglo-Saxon Manner*, (1972), an account of early British ethnography. That latter publication was the swan-song of her literary career and the intensification and expansion of her prodigious talents as an artist (graphics, sketches, portraits, formal and inventive sculpture).¹⁰

“Who has ever heard of a mystery story set in the past, and science fiction dealing with anything but the future...” There are exceptions to this general rule, and one of each came to be during the lifetime of Edith Simon. Dame Agatha Christie’s *Death Comes as the End* (1944) was a murder mystery set in early dynastic Egypt—not to be confused with Ms. Christie’s “modern” Egyptian crime novel *Death on the Nile* (1937). Both the opening chapter of Sir Arthur C. Clarke’s novel, and the opening scene of the coeval motion picture of the same name (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968), take place at “The Dawn of Man” c. 4 million years ago. This features a dark monolith that mysteriously appears unannounced and influences the future direction of humanity via the “invention” of defensive and offensive tools/weapons. A monolith is discovered on the moon (and then appears near, and ultimately on, the planet Jupiter) in the early twenty-first century.

“C.P. Snow’s novels” “Wuthering Heights”.... John Dos Passos’ 42nd Parallel” ... The references are to works of fiction which, with the exception of Emily Brontë’s only novel, are today much less “popular” than they were when originally published—i.e. Dos Passos by contrast far less than Snow, and Snow (no doubt due in part to cinema and TV mini-series exposure) far less than Brontë.

“... when the writer himself belongs to a previous era, it is sometimes forgotten that for his part he wrote about the past, as for example Tolstoy in *War and Peace* and Defoe in his *Journal of the Plague Year* ...” Tolstoy was born in 1828, sixteen years after the French invasion of Russia, and did not publish *War and Peace* as a complete novel until 1869. Defoe was about five years old when the great plague of 1665 struck London; he published *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722. Though a fictionalized account of that event, the novel owes its striking verisimilitude to the diaries of Defoe’s uncle, Henry Foe (*Journal* was published under the initials “H.F.”). Thus Defoe actually wrote about a situation he experienced and may have remembered; Tolstoy did not.

General Observations:

“... I am told, resent it if their author betrays them with a different kind [of historical novel] from which they first made his acquaintance ...

But the same again and again can but weary the palate.” Simon is being uncharacteristically self-referential by the use of the first person singular “I”. This certainly drew my attention to the sequence of her own historical novels. Though many of them are centred on the medieval period in European history, her *oeuvre* actually extended chronologically from Pharaonic Egypt of Old Testament times through World War II in the UK.

Her other published writings took her beyond those parameters into at least the early 1970s. She cast a wide net for plots and background, making it difficult to categorize her novels. As her sister Inge put it: “To me, everything she wrote seemed totally original and different from anyone else’s work. But each book was also totally unlike her last, so readers who wanted the same again would often be disappointed.”¹¹ In no small measure this need to “reinvent” herself with each new book may have become a burden, and led her to invest her energy and creativity in art after 1972.

“As many different books ... to name only a few variants.” In that single paragraph Simon draws attention to seven writers whose publications (five are specified by title) she finds illustrative of novels with “historical backgrounds.” The popularity and/or influence of several of those authors hasn’t fared well in the half-century since Simon paid tribute to them. It is unlikely that university-level European or American literature courses today will include Dr. Johnson’s novella *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759), Hervey Allen’s *Anthony Adverse* (1933),¹² George Eliot’s *Romola* (1863), or Bengtsson’s *The Long Ships* (1945).¹³

By contrast Flaubert’s *Salambô*, (1860), Wilder’s *The Ides of March* (1948), and many of Mann’s novels, enjoy steady readership (popular and/or academic). Presumably Simon’s descriptive phrase “Mann’s unplumbable well-of-the past” is to his *Joseph* tetralogy published in the late 1930s and 1940s and the inspiration for her own *The Chosen* (1940). It is worth noting that *Ben-Hur* (1880) and *Quo Vadis* (1896) have never gone out of print,¹⁴ and if Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers* (1845) isn’t widely read today it inspired cinematic versions (including animated films) on several occasions, and is currently a contemporary cult icon for video games and a USA chocolate bar manufacturer.

Mitchison (1897-1999) is enjoying a revival of popularity within a decade of her death. Like Simon she was a multi-faceted writer, at home with historical novels, science fiction, fantasy, poetry, and non-fiction. What Simon meant by “masochistic daydreams” isn’t clear to me unless it refers specifically to Mitchison’s fantasy writings which go back to her first publications in the 1920s.¹⁵ Simon painted a portrait of Mitchison, and though they were literary colleagues their strong personalities precluded a close friendship (I owe that information to Simon’s daughter Antonia Reeve). Simon, to my knowledge, did not write poet-

54 Simon and MacAdam

ry.¹⁶ Mitchison neither painted nor sculpted.

“... the weekly clyster ...” In American and Canadian English this would be “the weekly enema.” I am told by Simon’s daughter Antonia Reeve this term is still current in the U.K.

“For this reason I would include in the *genus* social studies ...” Simon then goes on to name John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925), and John Galsworthy’s *The Forsyte Saga* (1905-1921). All three are still in print, and all have been interpreted in cinema or TV mini-series format between WWII and the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Why Simon maintains that the title *An American Tragedy* discloses the novel’s “historical nature” escapes me.

“... the blackboard-or-textbook epic ...” If I understand Simon regarding this genre of writing, the novels of James A. Michener would certainly qualify. Apparently one or both of the two works subsequently mentioned in that same paragraph exemplify the genre as Simon saw it. See the next comment.

“Compare *The Man on a Donkey*” and the biography of Mary Tudor, both by the same author.” At the bottom of that page of the typescript Simon placed an asterisk (*) followed by “*E.M. Prescott*.” This is a mistake for H.F.M. Prescott (1896-1972), i.e. Hilda Frances Margaret Prescott, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, author, academic, and historian. *The Man on a Donkey* (1952) is a fictionalized chronicle of the popular resistance to the “Dissolution of the Monasteries” (1536-1541) under Henry VIII. *Simon’s essay postdates the publication of this novel*. Thus it falls within the years 1952-1961. Prescott’s related biography noted by Simon is *Spanish Tudor* (1940).

Three Great Historical Novels—Part 1:

“Three works which stand unequaled ...” It is surprising *not* to see certain works included in this short list, but its very brevity (why not a “top four” or “top five”?) must have prompted Simon’s selection. Two of the three novels had to be read by her in translation (either English or German—surprisingly she did not speak or read French); I do not know what translations she chose. The authors’ names appear in handwritten form at the bottom of the typescript page; I have placed each in parentheses after the title.

For today’s readers less familiar with one or more of the specified authors here is some basic information about each:

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). Russian novelist, essayist, dramatist, and edu-

cational reformer. *War and Peace*, his epic account of the Napoleonic era in Russian history, was first published in its entirety in 1869. It remains a classic of European literature and has lent itself to numerous adaptations.¹⁸ Although eligible to be a Nobel Laureate in Literature from 1901 until his death, that prize eluded him.

Sigrid Undset (1882-1949). Danish/Norwegian novelist; awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928 (the third woman to be honored in that category). *Kristin Lavransdatter* is a three-volume biographical panorama set in medieval Norway,

Robert Graves (1895-1985). British poet, translator, and novelist. *I, Claudius* (1934) was the first of two biographical novels of the Roman Emperor who annexed Britannia as a province in A.D. 43. *Claudius the God* was published in 1935.¹⁹

“It is man who is explored and not his grave—nor merely his bed ...” I am reminded, by this striking observation, of British poet Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” (c. 1655?) which includes these two lines: *The grave’s a fine and private place/ but none I think do there embrace*. Perhaps less apposite but no less grandly poetic are the concluding stanzas from Elinor Wylie’s “The Eagle and the Mole:” *If you should keep your soul/ From spotted sight or sound,/ Live like the velvet mole;/ go burrow underground/ And there hold intercourse/ With roots of trees and stones,/ With rivers at their source/ And disembodied bones.*²⁰

“... creating out of the void where the data spin at haphazard in infinity?” The expression “at haphazard” is correct English but seems an awkward construction to American or Canadian readers. I’m tempted to modify it to read “the data spin haphazardly within infinity” but I’m sure Edith Simon would scold me for doing so. By the same token *quiddities* in that very long sentence, and *whether or no* in the Closing Remarks, are also properly used but now seem dated.

Excursus: The Craft of the Historical Novelist

This short “section” is perhaps the closest Simon comes to being self-referential because it can be argued that her observations are formulated “from the inside out,” i.e. based on experiences she had as a writer of historical fiction. By c.1960, the probable date of this essay, Simon had already published eight novels in the twenty years since 1940, and may have begun work on what would be her ninth and last novel, *The Great Forgery* (1962). What better time to look back and reflect on the art and craft of her own career? It is characteristic of her that she seldom uses “I” or “my” in this essay, neither in these parenthetical remarks nor in the much longer and detailed exploration of how one should translate Thomas

56 Simon and MacAdam

Mann.²¹

Three Great Historical Novels—Part 2

“That he [Robert Graves] happened to be familiar with much of this matter ...” The allusion is to Graves’ solid background in Classics and Ancient History. Although not an academic himself²² his interest in Greek and Latin languages and literature, and in particular the life and times of the scholarly and antiquarian emperor Claudius (AD 41-54), resulted in the two novels which earned him great praise (but not a Nobel Prize) as a master of historical fiction. Graves and Simon shared an extended literary friendship; her daughter Antonia Reeve remembers visits by Graves (and by Rebecca West) to Simon’s Edinburgh residences on numerous occasions.

“If in this end he did contrive to let the teacher in him choke the creator ...” This is precisely the theme of the cinematic version of the final weeks in the life of Leo Tolstoy: *The Last Station* (2009) with Christopher Plummer and Helen Mirren in the lead roles.

Closing Remarks

“Utopia has ceased to be a place of perfection or impractical reform.” The post-WWII “Cold War” era left few illusions that the two great political/economic ideologies of the inter-war years (fascism and communism in their multiple manifestations) would be the “utopias” of the rest of the twentieth century. It is surprising that Simon doesn’t mention a single novel that takes up that theme, beginning (during WWII) with Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1940) and the first of the post-WWII dystopias, especially George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948). In the very next paragraph Simon is more explicit: *The paralysing fear and despair ... flourish in self-centered preoccupation*. Within a few years the Cuban Missile crisis (October, 1962) re-enforced that fear.

“Nobody would call mathematics a narcotic ...” There is evidence to the contrary in the autobiographical publications of Arthur Koestler which were available to Simon while she wrote this essay.²³ I have witnessed academic mathematicians “space out” in the classroom or at a lectern while elaborating on a concept or formula or equation they describe in almost mystical, lyrical terms. The same could be said about the impact of music on the psyche, but I cannot speak to that intensity of emotion regarding carpentry.

“Horror is aggravated by seeming unique.” This may be an oblique reference by Simon to The Holocaust. Although of German-Jewish parentage and descent she was a devoted atheist for all of her adult life. To the best of my knowl-

edge she made no direct reference to the Holocaust in any of her writings or in the almost 900 catalogued works of art (her concern for *social justice* is evident in her art). Simon's statement is preferable to Hannah Arendt's over-quoted and inaccurate observation about "the banality of evil."²⁴ Evil isn't banal even if its perpetrators themselves may seem to be.

Conclusion:

"Edith Simon's life brilliantly encompassed a number of careers: book illustrator, graphic artist, novelist, historian, translator, essayist, painter, sculptor, and draughtswoman. Her output was prodigious and prolific—her career as a writer alone would have satisfied more modest talents."²⁵

It is precisely that many-faceted, multi-talented, creative personality that comes through so clearly in *Moderation Be Damned!*(2005), the heavily illustrated volume dedicated to her by family and friends a few years after her death. Her published writing and her stunning visual art testify to those talents. It is my hope that her unpublished essays will also demonstrate her genius at work. A few words need to be said about Edith Simon's interest in two topics that imbue her books and her art: political/social causes, and religion.

Though she was active for and supportive of political and social causes during the late 1930s and for the duration of WW II, her marriage (1942), her three children (born in the early 1950s), and her devotion first to the craft of writing and then to the world of art, left no time for political activity.

For a personal account of Simon's experience in joining the Artists International in 1930s London see her seven page (with illustrations) autobiographical essay "Eye Witness" in *Moderation be Damned!* (2005) Chapter 2.

That period of her life was described in an interview with Inge Goodwin published in *The Scotsman* portion of a prominent Edinburgh newspaper in 2007:

"During the Blitz [1940] Edith also combined her interest in art with her political interests. 'She became very politically active,' Inge [her younger sister, now 88] who still lives in London, says fondly. 'And though she wasn't a member of a particular party she knew many communists and socialists. She was interested in social justice and her early art showed the injustice of conditions for people, not just through the war against fascism, but greater injustices throughout the world. Edith became involved with the Artists International Association whose members painted political banners, murals, and monumental heads of Lenin and Marx for demonstrations and rallies.'²⁶

This article began with a superscript quotation from a prominent New Testament scholar, Richard Bauckham. It is there for a dual purpose. One is to demonstrate

Bauckham's concern that a clear distinction is made between "history-like" writing (for him, the four canonical gospels of the New Testament) and "historical fiction" as we categorize it today. It is surprising that for the latter he doesn't mention the *non*-canonical gospels that various early Christian communities produced to "fill in the gaps" left by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.²⁷ The second purpose of that quotation is to ensure that attention, however brief, be given to Edith Simon's intense interest in religious themes in both her literature and her art.

Though she subscribed to no formal, established religion, she was a deeply spiritual person. This is vividly evident in her art. *Moderation Be Damned!* reproduces only a small portion of her sketches, portraits, and sculptures but among the 80 pp. devoted to her artwork there are at least a dozen examples in which a religious motif is recognisable. These cannot be discussed here. Much of the historical fiction, and much of the non-fiction, she produced over a period of 32 years (1940-1972) deal with religious themes. Nine of her fifteen books were of a "religious" nature, from Moses and the Exodus in *The Chosen* (1940) through Martin Luther in *Luther Alive* (1968) and early Christianity in *The Saints* (1968).

In that latter book, which was characterized by one reviewer as "this lucid, lively, and muscular little essay [that has] compressed a wealth of detail into very few pages,"²⁸ Simon focused attention on the developing cult of Christian "sainthood" which distinguished it from other religious communities in the Mediterranean region through the first six centuries AD. She carefully and wisely contrasts the portraits of the flesh-and-blood apostles and disciples who appear in the *Gospels* and the *Acts of the Apostles*, with the gradually de-humanized and spiritualized figures of monks and nuns and "holy persons" that emerge in the Eastern and Western churches during Late Antiquity.

That same theological development from human to semi-divine to fully deified figure can also be seen in the discernable "Jesus of History" to "Christ of Faith" transformation of the founder of Christianity. Bauckham would surely agree with Simon's identification of the hagiographical, transcendental approach of the Church Fathers to the life and death of Jesus that leads us away from historical tradition and into the realm of religious fantasy and even fanaticism. Simon and Bauckham agree that we must keep asking a fundamental question of the sources for reconstructing *any* event(s) in the past: are those sources simply *remembering history*, or are they *historicising prophecy*?

That in turn leads to the final point of this commentary, the choice of a title for Simon's untitled essay. In a note attached to Simon's typescript Antonia Reeve observed: "This is an article on the perception of the Historical Novel." In the narrower sense of the examples that Simon chose that may be true: all are novels. But Simon herself, by ending the first sentence of the first paragraph with the expression "historical fiction", broadens the scope of what she goes on to discuss. As mentioned above, she herself chose novels to recreate a sense of the recent or

even distant past for her own, and for her readers', pleasure. I don't think she would exclude alternative forms of fiction, such as poetry (especially epic poetry) or drama (comedy or tragedy), or short stories.

What she might have said about the development of the "nonfiction novel" (an early example of that is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, 1966) or the otherwise conventional biography that introduces fictional characters and scenes (as in Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, 1999) we cannot know. The whole issue of where "history" shades off into "fiction" or where "fiction" may be based on or incorporate "historical facts" is the subject of an article by Murray Krieger, "Fiction, History, and Empirical Reality" which was published about 15 years after Simon set down her thoughts in this essay.²⁹ Murray's focus is primarily poetry and drama, from Homer and Sophocles to the time of his article's creation, but he is also aware that "historical fiction" can be expressed in other ways:

"...[I]n their own ways, other forms of imaginative literature similarly suggest illusions of factual presentation. That is, they similarly 'feign.' In each case, similarly, the work displays—often as flagrantly as the *proscenium* does—those elements of artifice which cut off the work from life and proclaim it make-believe, thereby denying the intent to delude. If we see the play as initiating a real happening, history in the making, we can view the epic, and after it the novel, as imitations of history, as discourse, whether narrative history or narrative biography. The lyric poem or the first-person novel has a greater or lesser presentational resemblance to autobiography or the confession, each of these in its own way a historical mode, however subjective."³⁰

Edith Simon's essay "In Defense of Historical Fiction" also speaks to that same complex literary issue, and we would do well to listen to her voice and to reflect on her wisdom.

NOTES

1. Grateful thanks to Antonia Reeve and the family of Edith Simon for granting permission to publish this essay. Dori Seider read a complete draft of this article which is greatly improved by her comments and corrections. Thanks also to the library staff of Princeton Theological Seminary, and of The Institute for Advanced Study (both in Princeton, NJ) for assistance with background research.
2. Richard Bauckham, "Review Article: Seeking the Identity of Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32.3 (2010) 337-346 at 340-341.
3. Edith Simon, "On Translating Thomas Mann: Edited with an Introduction and Commentary by Henry I. MacAdam," *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 7 (2009) 111-142. Internal evidence from the typescript essay indicates it was written c. 1968.
4. First published in London by Jonathan Cape (1939). I read the Graphic Books American edition (Hasbrouck Heights, NJ, 1954) a year after its publication. On the synchronicity of circumstances (what Koestler later called "the roots of coincidence") regarding my discovery of his novel during the storm that destroyed his former island home, see Henry I. MacAdam, "Arthur Koestler's *The*

60 Simon and MacAdam

- Gladiators* and Hellenistic History,” *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 4 (2006) 69-92 at 84-86.
5. MacAdam, “Arthur Koestler’s *The Gladiators*” 69-71.
 6. Simon wrote and illustrated two children’s books before 1940: *The Adventures of the Little Pig & Other Stories*, and *Somersaults and Strange Company*. Both were published in London in 1937.
 7. Quoted in Inge Goodwin’s essay “Edith Simon” in Inge Goodwin, Giles Sutherland & Antonia Reeve, *Edith Simon: Moderation Be Damned!* (Edinburgh, privately published, 2005) Chapter 1: 12.
 8. Antonia Reeve <http://edinburghnews.scotsman.com/features.cfm?id=1388042007>. Accessed 14 November 2007.
 9. Goodwin, “Edith Simon” (2005) Chapter 1: 12.
 10. See the chapter “Edith Simon’s Art” by Giles Sutherland in *Moderation Be Damned!* 1-24 for an account of her career as an artist, based in part on her own unpublished essay on art written c. 1976 (from which Sutherland transcribed large portions relevant to his critique).
 11. Goodwin in *Moderation Be Damned!* Chapter 4: 10.
 12. Simon omitted Allen’s name; at 1224 pages his mammoth tale of international intrigue in the era of Napoleon Bonaparte is better known through the Hollywood film (1936) than through the novel itself.
 13. Simon’s description of the novel as a “spirited essay in folk art” is rather opaque in light of the book’s “Vikings in the Mediterranean and Russia c. 1000 AD” adventurous motif. It inspired the absurd Hollywood pseudo-epic *The Long Ships* (1964), a spinoff from an earlier movie, *The Vikings* (1958).
 14. There are three cinematic versions of each novel: *Ben-Hur* was filmed in 1907, 1925 and in 1959, and *Quo Vadis?* in 1924, 1951 and 2001 (the last in Polish). Both novels were presented as a mini-series for television in the USA (*Quo Vadis?* in 1985, *Ben-Hur* in 2010).
 15. Mitchison’s prolific literary career is well documented in the “Bibliography” section of Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison* (London, Virago Press/Little, Brown & Co., 1997) 323-327. The publications listed there span the nearly 70 years between 1923 and 1991.
 16. Simon wrote two plays, *The Inimitable* (about Charles Dickens) and *Love Me, Scum* (about Frederick the Great). Both undated plays attracted the attention of the BBC and also director/actor Laurence Olivier but they remain un-staged. She prepared one short (30 minute) film treatment, *A Perfect Marriage*, on the theme “a man who marries a horse” (I owe this information to Antonia Reeve). The film treatment is also undated: Goodwin, *Moderation Be Damned!* Chapter 1: 14.
 17. All three novels have astonishing super-endurance in various formats. Steinbeck’s saga was adapted for Hollywood in 1940 and 1992, and a made-for-TV movie in 1976. It was dramatized for the stage in 1990 (one performance was filmed for a PBS TV special in 1991), and it appeared as an opera in 2007. Dreiser’s novel was filmed in 1931 and again in 1951—the latter version has the title *A Place in the Sun*; it was rendered in operatic form in 2005. One portion of *The Forsyte Saga* was filmed in 1949; it was serialized in its entirety for TV in 1967 and 2002-2003, and for radio a dozen times since WW II.
 18. Russian cinema versions were produced in 1915 (no dialogue) and 1968 (the latter being the definitive film). A Japanese interpretation was released in 1947 and a British production in 1956. Sergei Prokofiev’s opera *War and Peace* debuted in 1955; USA stage versions opened in 1942 and 2008. Many radio adaptations have been made, notably in the UK.
 19. An attempt to film *I, Claudius* was made in 1937 but abandoned during production when the actress Merle Oberon was seriously injured in an auto accident. The BBC produced a mini-series in 1976 that garnered great acclaim. There were rumors in 2008 that a feature commercial film was planned, but to date that hasn’t happened. A stage version opened in London in 1972.
 20. From the collection of poems in *Nets to Catch the Wind* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1921) 42.
 21. The typescript of Simon’s “On Translating Thomas Mann” is just over 30 double-spaced pages or about 7,500 words. There are few comments in it that begin with or include “I” or “my.”
 22. Graves taught briefly at Cairo University in Egypt (1926-27), and much later accepted the honorary post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford University (1961-66). His mother was a niece of the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), whose family name (minus the “von”) became

In Defence of Historical Fiction 61

Graves' middle name.

23. Koestler's *Dialogue With Death* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1938) and *The Invisible Writing* (London, Macmillan, 1954) describe how Euclid's formula for predicting Prime Numbers brought about a dreamlike trance (described by Koestler as the "fragrance of eternity") during his three months (1937) on death row in a fascist prison during the Spanish Civil War. For details of that incident see Henry I. MacAdam, "Prime Numbers: Enigma Variations and Arthur Koestler's Window on Infinity," *Journal of the International Association of Transdisciplinary Psychology* 1: 1-6.
24. The phrase originated as the subtitle of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, Viking Press, 1963).
25. Sutherland, "Edith Simon's Art" in *Moderation Be Damned!* Chapter 4: 1.
26. Rosalind Gibb, "Slices of Edith's Remarkable Life," *Edinburgh Evening News* 31 August, 2007, <http://edinburghnews.scotsman.com/features.cfm?id=1388042007>, accessed 15 May 2010.
27. On the re-discovery, and publication in 2006, of the lost *Gospel of Judas* see Henry I. MacAdam, "New Christian Fiction," *Polish Journal of Biblical Research* 5.2 (2006)133-135.
28. George L. Smith, review in *Church History* 40.2 (1971) 209-210. Smith reviewed the USA edition of *The Saints* (New York, Delacorte Press, 1969), which ran to just 121 pp., as being a book "rich in illustrations" (*ibid.* 210). Regrettably there is no "Preface" or "Afterword" in which Simon might have shared her thoughts in researching and writing the volume. She did not keep a diary.
- 29 *Critical Inquiry* 1.2 (1974) 335-360. For readers who appreciate the formal, impersonal, or even extreme academic interpretation, this is the essay to consult.
- 30 *Ibid.* 344.