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HISTORY AND METAFICTION IN TIMOTHY MO'S *AN INSULAR POSSESSION*

In *The Modern British Novel*, Malcolm Bradbury notes that a "return to the past began to assume near-epidemic proportions" in British fiction in the 1980s (404). He largely means by this a return to historical fiction, set in more-or-less distant periods from the novels' times of publication. But Bradbury also suggests that this tendency does not show "that novelists were returning to the fictional verities of the past," but rather "making the relations of past and present narratives a matter for self-conscious literary examination" (406). By this he means that much British historical fiction in the 1980s (like much other fiction, and much fiction elsewhere in the world) has prominent metafictional concerns; that is, it tends to scrutinize in an overt manner the conventions of fiction, its claims, its procedures, its possibilities and its defects. This scrutiny is, in fact, extended further to a questioning of narratives, fictional and non-fictional, in general, and, in the case of many 1980s novels, this means a questioning of historical narratives.¹

In the following essay I wish to argue that Timothy Mo's novel *An Insular Possession* (1986) is a particularly good illustration of this tendency within 1980s British fiction, the combination of historical and metafictional elements. It shows a strong concern with history as event and process, and at the same time with history as account. It gives full weight to the force of historical occurrence, yet continually scrutinizes the narratives by which its characters make sense of those events. In this respects, Mo's novel shares a great deal with the paradigmatic British novel of the 1980s, Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983).² Critics have widely noted this double concern (with historical event and historical narrative) in contemporary British fiction. For example, Ansgar Nünning writes of the conjunction of typically postmodern metafictional concerns with the writing of historical fiction:

¹ This is scarcely surprising, given that – according to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* – the use of the word "history" to designate a narrative of events pre-dates that to designate the events themselves.

² For a full discussion of this aspect of Swift's novel, see Malcolm, and Holmes chs 1-3.

Durch die Adaptation postmoderner Erzählverfahren für Zwecke der Geschichts- vermittlung und durch ein erhöhtes Maß a metafiktionaler Selbstreflexivität haben die oben genannten Autoren den traditionellen historischen Roman weiterentwickelt zu einem "metahistorischen" Roman... bzw. zu einem neuen Typus von revisionistischer Geschichtsfiktion. (55)

(Through the adaptation of postmodern narrative techniques for the purposes of transmitting history, and through an increased quantity of metafictional self-reflexivity, the above-mentioned authors [in contemporary British fiction] have further developed the historical novel into a "metahistorical" novel... or, alternatively, into a new type of revisionist historical fiction.)³

Timothy Mo is one of the major novelists writing in Britain in the 1980s and early 1990s. Born in Hong Kong of a British mother and a Cantonese father, Mo came to the UK at the age of ten. He is the author of five novels – *The Monkey King* (1978), *Sour Sweet* (1982), *An Insular Possession* (1986), *The Redundancy of Courage* (1991), and *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* (1995). Most of his novels have been widely acclaimed by critics, and he has been the recipient of several literary prizes and, indeed, three times short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. He is seen by Peter Kemp as an important representative of the British novelists of his decade, setting his fiction outside the United Kingdom, and drawing on experiences from beyond Britain, the author, in *An Insular Possession*, of an "outstanding imperial-retrospect novel of the decade" (216-217). Bradbury, too, sees him as a significant figure (423), and even the usually acerbic D.J. Taylor writes of him as novelist whose work may partially balance what he sees as the deficiencies of contemporary British fiction (114).

All Mo's novels are accomplished and interesting pieces of work, but *An Insular Possession* marks a high point in his output – in terms of ambition, sophistication, and achievement. In a brief interview published in the *New York Times Review of Books*, Mo makes no secret of his ambitions with *An Insular Possession*. "If you are a gymnast or a skater," he declares, "you get boldness points for the difficulty of what you are trying to do. So many modern novelists write small novels perfectly. So many English writers write well within their abilities. I'm aiming for sweep and ambition" (Lipson 2). The critical attention the novel received bears witness to its achievement. In the TLS, D.J. Enright declares: *An Insular Possession* is a historical novel of so traditional a kind as to seem startlingly original." At the end of his review, he writes that, although the novel "is surely longer than it really needs to be," "there are no obvious candidates for deletion on the usual grounds of

³ This topic is further discussed by Lodge, Holmes (ch. 5), Gąsiorek (144-77), and Scanlon (6-7, 12-13, 15). Bernard Bergonzi rightly foresees the importance of this conjunction in 1979 (57).

cheapness, ingratiating, pretentiousness or plain bad writing – which is a remarkable achievement in a book of this size.” Paul Edwards in the *London Review of Books* gives Mo high praise by writing that his “recreation of the life of Canton and its environs between 1833 and 1841 carries an imaginative conviction comparable to the work of the predecessors he invokes: Defoe, Scott, Poe, Conrad and Forster” (Edwards 20). In the *New York Times Review of Books*, Robin W. Winks puts it thus: *An Insular Possession* is many things. Foremost, it is a fine book. Hermione Lee in the *Observer* is a little more sparing in her praise, but even she writes that the novel “makes a daring and confident journey,” although “not all readers are going to get to the finish.” The Booker Prize short-list and a degree of commercial success are likewise some indication of the novel’s achievement.

Part of the focus of Mo’s earlier novels is Chinese corruption and banditry (Mr. Poon’s financial dealings in *The Monkey King*, the Hung family’s activities in *Sour Sweet*); in *An Insular Possession* however the focus is on Western (particularly British) banditry on a grand scale. The novel’s action is set in the years 1834 to 1841 on the Pearl River Estuary in South China. Centered on the experiences of two young Americans, Gideon Chase and Walter Eastman, it involves the build-up to and eventual eruption of the First Opium War, in which British forces attempt to impose free trade, including the sale of Indian opium, on an unwilling Chinese Empire. The novel concludes with the seizure and founding of the colony of Hong Kong, and with the beginning of a long-term and seemingly secure British presence on the South China coast.

As a historical novel, *An Insular Possession* has four overlapping points of focus. It presents itself as an account of the events leading to the First Opium War, of the course of that war and of its aftermath. It also takes the form of a detailed, thick description of expatriate life on the South China coast in the 1830s. This obviously overlaps with the first focus. The novel is also closely concerned with the nature of the colonial encounters for which the events it depicts provide a framework. Finally, it is concerned on a more general level with what Gideon (along with the narrator) sees as the evil of history, the tendency of human political, economic, and cultural encounters to produce evil results.

The first focus is self-evident. The novel details, both in contemporary “documents” and the narrator’s own voice, the economic and political situation in South China in the mid-1830s, the motives of and constraints on the various parties involved, attempts to break the deadlock of Chinese and British (and European and North American) interests, and the eruption and conduct of the war. It gives details of both documented (authentic) and undocumented participants in the events – Commissioner Lin and Captain Elliott (historical, although the real Elliott spelled his name Elliot), Gideon Chase and Harry O’Rourke (fictional). Throughout, the novel is firmly fixed on the more public aspects of character and less on private experience.

It concludes with Hong Kong founded and the British settling in for a long presence on the Pearl River Estuary. But *An Insular Possession* is far from a bare (or even detailed) account of major historical events, both documented and invented. Large parts of the novel are composed of events and incidents which are peripheral to the great course of things. As Lee remarks, "The narrative boggles the mind with facts, figures, details, scenes, incidents, and the weight of words... It is addicted to specificity... and to grotesque minutiae... It has a passion for set pieces..." Expatriate life is set down in complex and seemingly irrelevant detail. The duck-shoot, the amateur theatricals, the learned disputes about photography and the relationship of photography and painting, the boxing-match, a walk by the sea with friends, the observations of Chinese life – all these are, on one level, irrelevant to the main historical events. They clearly however aim to give the texture of the characters' lives and also to provide a more complete picture of the time than an account of "historical" events alone can provide. They also form part of an examination of the nature of history and the historical.

All Mo's novels are concerned with colonial or post-colonial encounters, and this element is central to *An Insular Possession*. The central action of the novel concerns Britain's attempts to force the Chinese to accept opium. The arguments about the rights and wrongs of the trade make up the first extended dialogue of the text. Between O'Rourke and Eastman, it is set off from the rest of the text so far by being printed as a stage play (ch. 2). O'Rourke defends the trade on a variety of grounds (it does no harm, it is in Britain's interests); Eastman attacks it (it poisons the Chinese, the British are being hypocritical about it). Shortly afterwards, Gideon asks the *nad've* question of the head of his firm, Corrigan: "Is it right, though... that we should force the Chinese to trade with us when it is not their wish?" This produces a crushing response from his superior that, "Of course it is right, Chase. Trade, important as it is, is merely the vanguard of civilization" (ch. 3). The editor of the *Canton Monitor* is allowed to put forward the same argument (ch. 28). Although *An Insular Possession* is, in D.J. Enright's words, no "boring rant against imperialism and the unholy trinity of flag, Bible and merchantman the theme would provoke in some writers," the views of Corrigan and the editor are certainly questioned, not just by the protagonists Gideon and Walter, but also by the novel's omniscient narrator. The long early passage in which he analyzes the "triangles" of world trade, and the economic and political imperatives which drive the British incursion into China, undermines the philanthropic assertions of the Free Traders (ch. 4).

The colonial encounter becomes a matter of economic interests and force majeure, although in the novel it is never quite as simple as this. The campaign against the Chinese, in which modern technology is pitted against medieval firepower, becomes, in Gideon's words, "no war but a pleasant hunt for the victors and massacre for the vanquished" (ch. 38). The British intruders are shown to be guilty of duplicity (in Gideon's view) over the bombard-

ing of Canton (ch. 39), while their Indian troops and British officers rape, loot, and pillage. The attitudes of Americans and British to the Chinese are ironically and surely captured in the incident where Ridley shoots three Chinese passers-by dead because his dog has been killed. (ch. 39). They consider his actions fully justified. The conflict is not entirely one-sided however. Chinese resistance is noted even if it is only on the level of Ah Cheong's unwelcome appearance in Eastman's daguerreotype, carrying a chamber pot (ch. 34), and both the narrator and the correspondent of the *Lin Tin Bulletin* indicate the courage and resilience of irregular resistance to the British troops (ch. 39). The "undisciplined" Chinese mass actually proves much more resistant to traditional tactics than the British suspected. They avoid the Congreve rockets, run away and reform. "As well might Gough [the British general] flog a jellyfish, or the water which is both its element and main constituent."

The novel's depiction of colonial encounters is part of its discussion of the evil of history, and indeed of the world, in which human beings seem inextricably bound up with cruel systems and brutal events. Walter points this out to Gideon.

Did the sugar on the raspberry tarts you ate in your youth taste worse for being sweetened with the tear of slavery – for it should have tasted salt, but it did not. Did you think of the nigger who cut the cane? You did not. Merely to exist is to be involved in the system others have created to tend your daily needs. (ch. 15)

The *Lin Tin Bulletin*, which vehemently opposes the opium trade, is successful because one of its pages prints the latest opium prices on Lin Tin Island (ch. 30). In Gideon's view, decent men like Commissioner Lin and Captain Elliott find themselves involved in situations where their intelligence and good-will can scarcely prevent catastrophe (see Pursuer's "Humble Petition," ch. 31). Gideon himself becomes a party to death and destruction by acting as Elliott's translator (ch. 34). Looking at Canton in flames, he thinks in horror: "That I have contributed to this..." (ch. 39). Later, as he unavailingly pumps water from a sinking ship, Gideon explicitly reflects on human potential for evil. He thinks of "Weak, deluded, not wholly bad men, men with substantial goodness in their natures, producing when aggregated and afforded sufficient space and opportunity a colossal wickedness" (ch. 42). Although Gideon gives the other side of the argument its due (good men may shift the balance of good and evil), it is human evil that the novel dwells on, the greed and destructiveness of individuals, institutions, and states, which sweep all before them.

But that is not all the colonial encounter is in *An Insular Possession* – at least not from the point of view which dominates the novel, that of the Western colonialists. It is also a trip down a Chinese river, amateur dramatics, a walk on a beach, a cheroot smoked in the sun above Hong Kong,

a rowing competition, a boxing match, the adventure of war, the excitement of experiencing a new language and culture. Many of these are highly ambiguous experiences and are themselves closely bound up with colonial activities – the boxing match is reported in racist terms; the adventure and excitement of war involve killing Chinese soldiers and civilians; Gideon would not become a Chinese scholar without the forces of colonial trade. But part of the reason for the novel's leisurely and detailed digressions from its main focus on the destructiveness and hypocrisy of the colonial encounter is to make this encounter seem more complex. History, the novel suggests, is like the Pearl River—vast, ambiguous, complex. “The river succours and impedes native and foreigner alike; it limits and it enables, it isolates and it joins” (ch. 1).

As we have seen, historical events and processes are a major focus of *An Insular Possession*. However, this novel, which does so much to depict the force and substantiality of lived events, also takes considerable pains to emphasize that we learn of these through a particular text. It employs a number of strategies to foreground its own textuality. These are: the configuration of the narrator; his language; and genre mixture. All these serve to remind the reader that he/she is reading of history through a specific textual prism.

The narration of *An Insular Possession* is at once quite straightforward and complex. About half the text is narrated by an anonymous, omniscient narrator whose account is supplemented and enlarged by a variety of “documents” – letters, newspaper articles, diary entries. Two appendices consist of a gazetteer of biographies and place names relevant to the novel, and extracts from Gideon Chase's unpublished and unfinished autobiography. The novel thus consists of and is narrated through a panoply of different texts. The whole however seems to be contained within the narration of the omniscient, anonymous narrator who for a number of reasons can be identified as the implied author of the text (for example, the various autothematic, self-conscious passages in the narrator's own text indicate this).

The narrator is an extremely prominent one. He is self-advertising and self-conscious. For example, in chapter 2, he precedes a dramatic presentation of characters' dialogue with “Let us conceive of them as actors in a play, for Walter tends to histrionics on this issue.” He is a thoroughly didactic narrator who aims to explain history, background, and economic forces to his reader. The best example of this comes early in the novel when the narrator sets out to explain the economic forces behind the trade in opium (ch. 2). Like a good nineteenth-century narrator (indeed like the Dickens narrators whom he so much resembles), he is highly opinionated, for example, when he discusses O'Rourke's art in chapter 6. The narrator's omniscience is also that of a nineteenth-century narrator. He knows the future, characters' inmost thoughts, what they see and do not see, and can fill in personal histories where necessary. But he goes beyond the traditional nineteenth-century narrator (or at least a received image of that narrator) in a number

of ways which draw attention to himself and his actions as a narrator. He is capable of self-irony. After the long (and eloquent) disquisition on the triangles of the slaves-cotton-opium-tea trade, he bursts out with a self-mocking "Triangles? Bah, sir" (ch. 4). His bad jokes are not only a source of humor, but draw attention to the narrator and the act of story-telling. "Yes," he says, the life of the American sailor Captain Gale "was made miserable until he came to command" (ch. 10). His comments on Alice and cigars ("Ooh, papa, it's so big, and brown, and wrinkled!" (ch. 11)), or those on the Venerable Ow ("Considering the mental anguish involved in learning Chinese, Ow is a good name for an instructor" (ch. 11)) involve the kind of verbal play which draws attention to narrator and narration. He ironically comments on the art of fiction in his own voice and not just through Gideon Chase's.

And so Camoes is perhaps as representative a figure as any for the place, the Portuguese, and their empire; that is, if the artist can be said to be emblematic of anything but his own piffling neuroses. Which he transmutes, of course, into the universally and perpetually current coin of particular creation. (ch. 8)

In addition, there is much explicit play with the reader. For example, the account of Ridley's funeral quite ostentatiously fails to name the person being buried. The device to create suspense is laid utterly bare, and the passage takes the form of explicit reader manipulation (ch. 41). Earlier, the narrator has refused to give the name of Chase's and Eastman's rival editor with a resounding "This is not germane to the present narrative" (ch. 30). In such an overall configuration, the narrator's complete withdrawal from passages of dramatic dialogue (for example, chs. 2, 16, 43) seems paradoxically self-advertising. It certainly exposes issues of narration and how stories are told.

Stylistic/linguistic aspects of the narrator's voice also foreground narration. Those parts of the text related by the narrator himself are given in the present tense (one could compare the omniscient sections of Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853)). This has several functions in the text, but one is surely to draw attention to narration. Similarly, the narrator's superior knowledge, the sophisticated vocabulary and syntax which accompany his irony and verbal play are prominent. He knows how the factory retainers get clothes clean – "Trick of the trade known to the washerwoman: she flogs the hose on a stone" (ch. 21). As Walter sails into Hong Kong harbor for the first time, his thoughts are "interrupted by a whistle from Remedios, who points to a vessel Walter is not far out in imagining a brig but is, in fact, a scow some hundred yards ahead" (ch. 29). Stylistic sophistication ("brig" and "scow") is apparent at least in the second of the above examples, but other extended examples could be found virtually at random. The effect in the following is cumulative, but unmistakable – with lexis like "conform by necessity," "curious" (meaning strange), "significant conjunction" and "schroffs" raising the extract's stylistic level substantially.

Architecturally, all the Factories conform by necessity to the same curious plan. They are, with the grand exception of the English Factory (and the English dominate the Canton trade), fairly narrow, maybe six or seven yards across, but extend backwards several hundred feet. Their length is broken up into smaller sections, or little houses, of, say, 10 yards' depth. They have three storeys. The top floors are walled off from each other, resembling a row of tiny one-roomed cottages or, though built before the significant conjunction of steam and iron, a line of railway carriages... The ground floors, however, are flagged with large granite paving stones and run as uninterrupted corridors, hundreds of feet long, beneath the offices and bedrooms of the top two storeys. In these long, shady arcades lounge native servants and messengers, while shroffs test silver by ringing the coins on the paving stones. (ch. 3)

The whole act of narration is further foregrounded by the wide variety of means and styles which are deployed besides the narrator's own voice. This text is almost as generically mixed as the generic kaleidoscope of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, although in Swift's novel all the genres are produced by one narrator. The functions of such genre mixture are also similar. First, like the narrator's language and sophistication, they foreground the act of narration in their abrupt transitions and sharp juxtapositions. One is simply aware, as in any multiply narrated work, of different tellers and ways of telling. Second, these different genres raise problems of giving an account of events, of the world. As in *Waterland*, the diversity of kinds of text explicitly suggests that it may be very difficult to come to terms with reality. *An Insular Possession* takes the form of a discursive hybrid, sprawling over the confines of the novel proper. Besides the omniscient narrator's fictional narratives, there is a variety of texts, purporting to be non-fictional documents of various kinds. Large parts of the novel consist of extracts from the rival journals, the *Canton Monitor* (later the *Hong Kong Guardian and Gazette*) and Eastman's and Chase's *Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee*.

These extracts themselves contain a wide variety of articles – on local and world events, on social matters, on Chinese life and customs. They include readers' letters, at least one literary review, and advertisements. Other parts of the novel consist of diary entries and private letters. The two appendices continue this aspect of the novel. These different kinds of text have a great deal in common stylistically with each other and with the direct speech of the characters within the omniscient narration. They all employ an early nineteenth-century style which stands in marked contrast to the modern diction of the main narrator, and not just with regard to their use of a variety of tenses to recount events. Examples can be found at random to illustrate the orotund formality of documents and speakers. They combine with the omniscient narration to form a very self-advertising text.

A number of studies of contemporary British fiction point to a revival of interest in serious historical fiction since the late 1960s. In *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (1990), Alison Lee discusses novels such as Swift's *Waterland* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as examples of "historiographical metafiction" (16) – that is, as works of fiction which scrutinize and raise questions about the claims and procedures of written history, of history as scholarly activity, and of fiction. She points to ways in which in the 1980s such texts stress the complexity and artifice of both history and fiction (36, 40). *An Insular Possession* clearly falls within such a class of text. It has a very explicit concern with history as a recording and interpretation of the past; it is full of motifs which refer to questions of contrivance, illusion, truth, and interpretation; and it is a strongly autothematic text, reflecting on and foregrounding questions of story-telling, fiction, and representation.⁴

Critics have noted the novel's concern with history in the above sense. For example, Winks in the *New York Review of Books* comments that "It [the novel] is moved on (and at times retarded) by long passages from the competing newspapers, by letters, chunks apparently ripped from gazetteers – in short, told through all the historian's customary primary sources, from eyewitnesses to memoirs." In the *London Review of Books*, Edwards writes that the *Lin Tin Bulletin's* misreading of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as "an enthralling factual account" is "a reminder that we are on treacherous ground. *An Insular Possession* is fiction, not fact. It is not history written unequivocally within that tradition of Vico, Hegel and Marx, confident that what man has constructed he can construe. We should not be too reassured by the appendix of biographies which, in delimiting 'fact' from 'fiction,' indicates the degree of artist's licence employed... As a novelist, Timothy Mo is heir to a literary tradition, not just a historiographical tradition, and 'fact' has a fairly low status in the Post-Modernist phase of the novel." Such concerns are evident throughout *An Insular Possession*. The topic is humorously introduced when Walter lectures Gideon on shooting ducks. The thing is, apparently, to shoot ahead of the duck, not where it is when one takes aim. "That's pure history, my boy, an event long in the past, and you will miss" (ch. 10). A garrotting takes place before the factories in Canton.

Too late the foreigners sally from the nearby Factory, bearing firearms as well as sticks. They are baffled, thwarted. Not only is there no victim to rescue, no assailants to repel, there is no evidence whatsoever of a crime. All have vanished into the thinnest

⁴ It seems reasonable to distinguish between the terms self-referential and autothematic. I take self-referential to refer to means by which the text draws attention to its own textual substance (for example, the kind of narrational configuration and genre mixture I have noted above). Autothematic, on the other hand, refers to a thematised concern with literature within the text.

of airs. Can it really have taken place? What they confront is not so much a provocation as history, and it has run like water through a sieve. (ch. 26)

In his autobiography Gideon argues that the nineteenth century's understanding of history, and of even wider intellectual fields (Darwin, Marx and Engels, Malthus) was fundamentally melodramatic, an imposition of "the emotions and devices of the melodrama" on the stuff of life (Appendix II). Gideon seems to prefer the metaphor of the river. He comments on the dates and events of history.

To mark and to make sense of such a passage, men look to measure in Anno Domini, to fix by what they believe are endings, signatures on a piece of paper. How deluded is this formality! Treaties, Congresses, Conventions mean nothing, except to the participants – the stuff of history is less tangible, but lies in a popular mood whose ebbs and flows are not measurable by the month or year. (Appendix II)

But, he has implied earlier, the pursuit of "literal truth" is problematic. Gideon is commenting on journalism and photography "the most powerful agents of this novel passion for the actual and the real" which typifies his century.

Yet how deluded was this search for truth, literal truth, and how fallacious its instruments, for there is small verity in the newspaper or the photograph, though both purport to be fact in its purest form. At best, how often is their apparent fidelity contingent on the prejudices, expressed or unconscious, of the producer, not to mention the consumer. At worst, how easily may their evidence and proofs, seemingly so incontrovertible, be falsified and twisted in unscrupulous but skilled hands into a travesty of the actual! (Appendix II)

Giving an account of past events is certainly made problematic in the text. What happened? Is it recapturable? Is it knowable? These issues are raised constantly via the "documents" which the novel reproduces – diary entries, posters, advertisements, newspaper articles. The scope of the problem is pointed to frequently – the poster for Walter's production of *The Rivals* in Macao declares that "By insistence of the public, another showing" will take place, but the poster was "printed up well before any demand might be measured" (ch. 16). O'Rourke's sketch of the seashore in Macao records footprints – "These footprints don't exist – Gideon checks" (ch. 27). When Eastman photographs Chinese corpses by a fort, he rearranges them and surrounding detritus to make what is presumably a better photograph (ch. 37). The very textuality of written documents is pointed to. They are text, not neutral windows on reality. In Gideon's early essays for the *Lin Tin*

Bulletin, Walter continually intrudes facetious editorial comments (ch. 22). He also has to publish an acknowledgement of printing errors which quite materially affect meaning (ch. 24). Walter ruefully reflects that "One of the ineluctable nuisances of producing a periodical newspaper of a certain size is that it may not be tailored to fit events, so much as events must be dove-tailed to fit its stereotyped column space which, depending on what has to be inserted, appears alternatively as a voracious acreage or a ridiculously finite allotment" (ch. 30). Keshen's letter to Captain Elliott cannot simply be translated by Gideon, but must be painstakingly interpreted as the insult it is (ch. 35). Furthermore (and this is a source of humor in the novel), "documents" and "sources" question and contradict each other. Gideon's letter on the submerging of old feuds in the threatened Factories is immediately refuted by his former principal's forbidding him to enter the firm's premises (ch. 26).

The veracity of the article in the *Lin Tin Bulletin* on conditions in Manchester is questioned by the *Monitor* (ch. 28). The former's reading of Poe's *Narrative* is denounced by the latter (ch. 31). The two newspapers give quite different accounts of the campaign around Canton. "The men in general behaved very well" in the *Monitor* becomes "Rape, robbery, arson, and murder were the order of the day among the Indian troops" in the *Bulletin* (ch. 39). Was Captain Elliott's policy wise or foolish, weakly vacillating or enlightened? The *Monitor* and the *Bulletin* do not agree. Gideon and Walter and the narrator judge him positively, but opposing views are heard. The narrator makes an ironic memo to himself and the reader. "*Mem.* Never believe what you read in newspapers, even a crusading one" (ch. 23).

But the untrustworthiness of accounts of any kind is raised in the first appendix when we learn that, according to the gazetteer, the editor of the *Monitor* fought a duel with "Professor Gideon Chase (q.v.)" (Appendix I). The narrator's report – that the duel was with Eastman – is inevitably privileged in the novel. Similarly, Major-General Gough's letter (a document), praising Gideon for his courage under fire, is comic and untrustworthy because we have had the narrator's earlier account (also with its factual paraphernalia of time and place) of how Gideon does much of what he does while concussed (ch. 39). But, one must add, the narrator's account is clearly fictional and marked as such – by omniscient narrator and present tense narration. The novel is a self-questioning polyphony of texts. In this respect, *An Insular Possession* differs from an earlier and strikingly successful historical novel, J.G. Farrell's *Troubles* (1970). Like Mo's novel, Farrell's intersperses the narrative of the end of British rule in Southern Ireland with quotations, in this case from the *Irish Times*. Not only are there many fewer such quotations, however, but their function seems quite different. The quotations in *Troubles* are intended to augment the main narrative, to provide a broad backdrop to it, and to illustrate the mood and thoughts of a besieged Protestant Ascendancy rather than to raise questions about the nature and status of history and fiction.

Running through all this is an interwoven set of motifs of contrivance, illusion, questionable "truth," and interpretation. Gideon's concerns at the end of his life (Appendix II) belong here, as does the narrator's comment on Father Ribeiro's intellectual pursuits. The dates of the calendar

come as reminders from the real world, ghostly echoes which penetrate, just, the particular chamber wherein he grapples with those elusive, insubstantial issues of correspondence and meaning which, even as he seizes them, recede into a redundant cul-de-sac of history. The world goes on. Issues fail to be resolved, questions answered. They simply cease to matter or are posed in a subtly different manner, which shifts the terms of the entire problem. (ch. 30)

Gideon at one point even quotes Donne's lines on truth from the "Satyre: On Religion" (ch. 40). Examples could be multiplied – O'Rourke's drawings are masterly creations of illusion through a few lines (ch. 6); for the sake of composition, Walter inserts a non-existent branch in Alice's painting (ch. 11); the fishermen's cormorants on the river are at first uninterpretable shapes for Gideon (ch. 16, 22); no one can detect Remedios's fraud in the duel between Walter and the editor of the *Monitor* (ch. 30); as Gideon points out, the cause of the duel, the suggestion of homosexuality in a Biblical quotation, is open to other interpretations (ch. 30); and so on. Gideon's reflections on the sinking *Louisa* – is the perception of good and bad just a matter of perspective? – are as usual representative of a central topic in the novel (ch. 42).

As one might expect in a late twentieth-century novel, *An Insular Possession* has foregrounded metafictional concerns. The function of the prominent narrator is to draw attention to the act of story-telling and to the activity of that figure in shaping the textual material. See, for example, the narrator's self-advertising suppression of the name of the *Monitor's* editor (ch. 30). Similarly, the text's own organization, the mixture of evident fiction and seeming documents, including appendices, raises the issue of how fiction differs from and is similar to and draws on fact. This juxtaposition also raises questions about "fact", and indeed the two become inextricably linked and interwoven in the course of the novel. Eastman's and O'Rourke's arguments about painting and painting's relation to early photography also raise questions about how art represents the world, while the discussion of Poe's *Narrative* also focusses the reader's attention on how literary texts are read, misread, and interpreted. Perhaps the clearest autothematic element in the novel occurs in Gideon's essay "On the literary modes of the Chinese" (ch. 25). In this long essay, Gideon (or rather "Pursuer") discusses what he sees as typical features of European and North American literary texts, and how Chinese literature differs from these. This is a sophisticated and, despite its style, very modern-sounding discussion of differing formations of narrative, time, and the "Ideal Reader." The Western linear narrative is contrasted

with the digressive, circular narrative of the Chinese novel; the progressive chronology of the Western with the timeless present of the Chinese; the female readership of the West with the male readership of China. Not only are these general reflections on ways of doing novels, but they are also reflections on *An Insular Possession* itself. The essay draws the reader's attention to the text's own hybrid nature – linear but digressive, obsessed with time markers but in a large part narrated in a timeless present. The issue of the gender of the implied readership is unanswerable here, but *An Insular Possession* does tend to draw on genre traditions such as the war-story, the adventure story, and military history, often associated with a male readership. Gideon's autobiography, as so often, sums up this aspect of the novel, and several others as well. He concludes his discussion of the folly of looking for "literal truth" in journalism and photography, as earlier in history, by suggesting that "Perhaps the essential truths may only be possessed in utter contrivance, where the artifice is openly acknowledged, as in a painting or a work of fiction where no facts may be found at all" (Appendix II). The novel that queries notions of documentary truth, that foregrounds questions of illusion and interpretation, that emphasizes its own methods and artifice may yet tell some truth. Presumably this applies to *An Insular Possession* (as it applies, in its different way, to Swift's *Waterland* and to a host of other contemporary British novelists' work).⁵

An Insular Possession is a very ambitious novel. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, it marks a huge leap from Mo's earlier novels. It seems as ambitious, and as successful as Swift's *Waterland*, a text which, for all the substantial differences between them, resembles it. A highly sophisticated, self-conscious examination of a particular historical moment, of a remarkable breadth, with considerable humor and extraordinary verbal skill – these are elements, among others, it shares with *Waterland*. But they are also qualities which stand on their own and need no supporting comparison. This complex presentation of colonialism must surely be one of the finest and most sophisticated British historical novels of the post-war period.

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⁵ See, for example, Kazuo Ishiguro's first three novels (*A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989)), or Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991).

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