The personification of history is a woman robed in white, who stands with one foot resting on a square block of stone and looks backward. She writes in an open book supported on the back of a winged figure of Time ... In one hand he holds a pruning knife or sickle, and the serpent ring of Eternity.

'Historia', in Cesare Ripa, Iconologia, 1603

Scientists can fiddle their data, steal from one another, and defraud the public; only historians can betray all the generations of the dead.

Nancy Partner, 'Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History', 1986

... they believe European culture is in a state of epistemological chaos. White people, they say, don’t know what to remember and what to forget, what to let go of and what to preserve. They don’t know how to link the past with the present...

Deborah Bird Rose, 'Hidden Histories', 1992

History is not just a science but also a form of memoration. What science has ‘established’, memoration can modify. Memoration can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete (suffering) and the complete into something incomplete.

Walter Benjamin, 'Convolute N', Arcades Project
Ann: In Tony Hillerman's crime novels, the two detectives, Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn, with different temperaments and skills, begin following clues to a mystery unbeknownst to each other, pursuing separate trails, only meeting towards the end with what they think they've worked out. Though this is an essay jointly worked out and worked upon, I start in the first person, introducing issues which lead us to bring together the concepts 'history' and 'allegory'. John will then explore allegory as an aesthetic, referring to Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*. I return to explore the ways in which an understanding of history as allegory helps us develop more complex readings of historical texts; I take as my example (and I could have taken practically *any* example) Australian historical writing on the convict past, especially the female convict past, a foundational story in white Australia's bizarre beginnings. We will then jointly conclude with some reflections on history's mimetic and fantastical character, relating historiography in its formative period to nineteenth-century desires to defeat time and death, either by preservation or by precision and exactitude of reproduction, as in Egyptology, taxidermy, photography, and in *fin de siècle* film. Through a focus on the nature and forms of historical discourse, in this case on its inescapable and complex allegorical character, our ongoing project is to try to specify the Westernness of Western historical writing—in Dipesh Chakrabarty's fine phrase, to 'provincialize Europe'.

**INTRODUCTION**

The act of remembrance through history, the desire to impose 'form on formless time', lies deep in our culture. Not in all cultures, as Lévi Strauss remarked: historical thinking is not *necessary* thinking; is not essential to our humanity. But in Western societies it is inescapable, we cannot think without or beyond distinctions between future, present, and past, and such thinking is deep in the classical and Judeo-Christian heritage. The Greek Hellenistic view of history, as in Herodotus and Thucydides, suggests that history can be a science, based on the omnipresent workings of repetition, causality, and continuity in society and nature. In Judaic thought, as in the story of Exodus, the figures of servitude in Egypt, flight through the desert, revelation on Mt Sinai, are conceived as historical; history is unpredictable, the messianic, or catastrophic, may occur at any moment, unrelated to previous patterns of events. In Christianity, the events of Christ's suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection are conceived as historical, the basis of Western calendrical time. The salience of Western calendrical time is also recurrently intensified by notions of the centurial, the *fin de siècle*, and the millennium, with an accompanying abundance of visions of utopia and dystopia, foreboding, dread, and hope.
The Western phenomenology of time is being within a substance (to borrow a term from Spinoza), entwinedly secular, sacred, and mythic, thick with notions of fall, redemption, revelation, incarnation, providence, prophecy, and miracle.

Unlike those societies that do not allow talk of the dead, regarding them as too powerful, Western societies, imbued with notions of eternal return, resurrection, the messianic, the apocalyptic, the millenarial, invoke and evoke them endlessly. The metaphysical importance of Western historiography, including biography and autobiography, is that on behalf of Western culture as a whole, it attempts to defeat death, to romance eternity, by bringing the people and places that actually existed in the past, and now do not, back to life. Western historiography is always attempting to perform the miracle of restoration.

If we historians sat back to think about it, we might find our project somewhat morbid, always talking about the dead, always having to confront the dreadful inexorability of the passing of time, and the radical difference between now and then. Yet it doesn’t seem morbid in our daily practice; and we rarely feel that we are engaged in a necromantic enterprise. Reading a history book is not like walking through a morgue; we do not think of the house of history as a necropolis. The people we research in the past are not dead to us—we read their words, or words about them, and study their likeness in painting and photograph, as if looking at living people. We write about them as if writing about the living not the dead, as if in the midst of a mutually understood mimetic game, as if they are with us in the room.

(As an aside, I note that in studying the very recent past, as I tend to do, most of the people we discuss are still alive, though we do witness the death of one after another actor in, or witness to, our story, as we write. Our task of rescuing the past from the finality of being past is in this case a little different, becoming an attempt to prevent people’s erasure before their death. Through oral history, we invite them to participate in this memorializing process, to help us determine just how they will survive their own deaths, how they will be remembered.)

If history, then, is a form of defiance, it can only succeed if we think of the stories it tells as verifiably true, a truth guaranteed by Western modes of cognition. The truths history establishes prove the past imperishable: in being objectively present, history saves the past from eternal death. Historians generally agree that the defiance succeeds, more or less, that their accounts and descriptions and evocations and analyses are basically true. What limits there are will be mainly to do with limits in the sources themselves or perhaps with the individual historian. But it is not to do with the nature of the historical project itself: historians can discover the truth about the past. This truth can be attained through the special powers and distinctive
sensibility of the professional historian: rigour, intelligence, judicious selection and interpretation of facts, patience, reason, and a common sense that after practice becomes almost instinctive. The search for historical truth has come to entail commitment, overtly or covertly, to a realist epistemology: an ideal of history as embodying objectivity and logic, demonstrating causality and continuity, enabling insight into what really happened. Historical writing also entails a commitment, thinking or unthinking, to a realist aesthetic, in particular to an affinity with the nineteenth-century realist novel and its omniscient author. It was not for nothing that Henry James urged novelists to 'speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian'.

Nietzsche, theatrically critical of Western metaphysics, was especially caustic about what was coming to be modernity's ideal historiographical mode and the historian's personality. Of historians who aspire only to describe the past as it was, he said savagely:

Their major claim is to be a mirror of events; they reject teleology; they no longer want to 'prove anything'; they disdain to act the part of judges (and in this they show a measure of good taste); they neither affirm nor deny, they simply ascertain, describe ... All this is very ascetic ... The modern historian has a sad, hard, but determined stare, a stare that looks beyond, like that of a lonely arctic explorer ... There is nothing here but snow; all life is hushed. The last crows whose voices are still heard are 'What for?' 'In vain' ... As for me, such a sight makes me furious, such 'spectators' embitter me against the spectacle more than the spectacle itself—meaning history, of course ... I have no patience with mummies who try to mimic life, with worn-out, used-up people who swathe themselves in wisdom so as to appear 'objective', with histrionic agitators who wear magic hoods on their straw heads, with ambitious artists who try to pass for ascetics and priests yet are, at bottom, only tragic buffoons. "

If Nietzsche's rage and scorn is warranted, and the stories historians tell cannot be seen as true, if they are recognized as reflecting the times in which they are told rather than the times they attempt to bring to life, then the historian has failed in his or her bid to recover the past. It remains hidden, dead, gone, and the enterprise of history is proved impossible. The desire to free Historia, history personified as a young woman, from the dread knife of Old Man Time, has become a rescue fantasy; the distinctive powers of the historian, once so thoroughly believed in, are now seen as illusory; and only alchemy, or magic, can bring past and present together.

Nietzsche attempted to outrage historians' desired impersonality by foregrounding his own voice, positioning, feelings, reflections, by holding the mimetic desire up to ridicule. Yet historians were not deflected by his critique and mockery. They continued, and continue, amidst a profusion elsewhere of modernist and now postmodernist experimental play with form and genre, to adhere to a realist aesthetic. We stubbornly refuse to insert
into our narrative descriptions and evocations not directly sustainable from the documents; we are much more restrained than the historians of the early nineteenth century, those remarked on by Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. In a conversation with Miss Tilney on 'history, real solemn history', the sprightly young Catherine remarks:

Yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes' mouths, their thoughts and designs—the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books.

Miss Tilney replies:

I am fond of history—and am very well contented to take the false with the true ... If a speech be well drawn up, I read it with pleasure.

This famous fictional conversation could not happen now. We historians would not allow invented speech in a history book, and where we do find it, regard it as extremely adventurous and postmodern. In most history-writing today, then, there continues to be an investment in mimesis: the notion that language can imitate reality. Generally historians would be generally irritated to be reminded how metaphoric their own language is, including their favourite terms, like 'document' (which teaches and instructs), 'source' (suggesting the springs from which a river begins to flow, a fluid origin), and 'evidence' (a visual metaphor indicating that from the vanished past which is brought back into sight). The tone of historical writing seems almost inevitably to require an authoritative and hidden narrator who asserts just how the past really was; who conceals rather than reveals the uncertainties, contradictory explanations, and unknowability of the past.

Here lies the threat from postmodernism, why it seems to induce epistemological vertigo, shortness of intellectual breath, sense of convulsive death to the West. In its radical questioning of Western historical discourse, indeed of the ability of language itself to refer straightforwardly to a world external to it, it suggests that the past cannot actually be recovered, that the historical project is impossible, and that history cannot but live by its own fictions, its quixotic belief in its own truth. Recognizing this threat to their enterprise, their being, many historians attack postmodernism as ahistorical, a fatal betrayal, and reassert the possibility of history. If we cannot see an historical account as true, they ask, then why bother with the difficult and time-consuming process at all? Can the document teach us nothing? Other historians, and I would include myself here, respond to the challenge with a desire to explore the possibilities of a postmodern history, which seeks to relate multiple narratives; to accept, self-reflexively foreground, and find representational forms for our inability to tell a single true story; and to express an ironic awareness of the illusion of a single knowable past.
In an earlier essay on history and fiction, we explored the specificities of historical rhetoric, the methods by which historians convince their readers that what they say is not only possible, but actually happened. In this essay, we suggest that understanding the specificities of historical discourse can be approached via allegory, a mode of interpretation and figuration that has been important in European and Western history since antiquity, since its invention by Greek interpreters of Homeric myths and its subsequent influence in classical, Hellenistic, Rabbinic, and Christian thought, accumulating along the way a long and rich history of conflicting traditions and theoretical dilemmas.

Allegory is usually minimally defined as a form of indirect narrative, providing treatment of one subject under the guise of narrating another, and often presenting an abstract argument through a concrete example or personified figure or image or emblem. Yet this definition of allegory is also a definition of history. History, like allegory, relies on narrative, a temporal sequence. In an endless series of displacements between present and past, the past becomes a repertoire of allegories. History, that is to say, can be seen as a particular form of allegory, always and inescapably telling a concrete story about the past as a way of pondering and reflecting on, and acting and participating in, the present, the present that yet is always in wild contradictory motion, always already becoming the past.

John: In his 1928 *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, evoking the seventeenth-century German baroque mourning play (Trauerspiel), Walter Benjamin creates a conversation between history and allegory, allegory as both mode of interpretation and as a specific kind of textuality.

In the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue', Benjamin mixes Judaic and Greek figures of thought with Cabballistic notions of micro-interpretation. The prologue suggests conceptions that have become increasingly important in continuing conversations between historiography and literary theory. The prologue proposes that truth is always historical, it does not exist in a pure realm of ideas and concepts; historical truth cannot be directly apprehended in terms of epistemology, since the language of philosophy always involves representation (Darstellung); the search for truth is consequently always indirect, as it becomes aware of the intervening presence and workings of its own language, its own representations and figures. Like Nietzsche, Benjamin foregrounds his own language as necessarily metaphoric, and if metaphoric, why not highly, outrageously, shockingly, intriguingly so. Such thinking anticipates Hayden White's now familiar argument that we should subject historical discourse to an analysis of its figurative and rhetorical aspects, which help shape a text's historical explanations.
Benjamin finds in the baroque allegory of the mourning plays the basis for a new kind of history and methodology: philosophical, self-reflexive, and self-consciously figural. In the prologue he tells us that the methodology of his book will draw on the treatise of the Middle Ages. By this he means that it will be philosophical history of a certain kind: it may be didactic in tone but it will lack the conclusiveness of an instruction; it does not seek an uninterrupted purposeful structure; its method is representation, but representation as digression (Darstellung als Umweg). In pursuing different levels of meaning in an object, philosophical history has both the incentive to begin again and the justification for its irregular rhythm. Like the mosaic, it represents fragmentation into capricious particles, emphasizing the distinct and separate. What might be most valuable to investigate is the most singular, eccentric and extreme of examples, the most unusual or isolated; examples to be found even in the merest fragment, the minutest thing.

In the first half of the book 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy', Benjamin says that the mourning plays were so long ignored because they were held to be a caricature of classical tragedy, offensive or even barbaric to refined taste. Rather, he suggests, the plays work on their own theory of drama, where the influence of Aristotle is notional or insignificant; in particular there is no unity of place, and any will to classicism is overwhelmed in wildness and recklessness, in highly baroque elaboration. The mourning play is historical, its main characters figures of the monarch, courtier, and intriguer. The monarch and his court become the keys to historical understanding. The monarch is an incarnation of history, the history of his society, holding the course of history in his hands like a sceptre. But he always leads his society towards disaster. In such baroque drama contented radiance is unknown; the baroque knows no eschatology, no ideal telos; the world is disturbed, like a cataract, imminently flowing over the edge into catastrophic violence, revelling in scenes of cruelty and anguish. As a theatre of extremes baroque drama was drawn to the exotic, to visions of absolute imperial power in the Orient or the theocratic empire of Byzantium. As tyrant the figure of the monarch evoked sympathetic wonder as holder of dictatorial power, even as he is surrounded by fratricide, infidelity, wife-murder, battering of children's brains; the paragon mythical figure here is Herod, figured
as anti-Christ; Herod who erupts into madness and destroys himself and his entire court, his life ending in insuperable despair.

Yet whether entirely good or entirely bad, whether as tyrant or martyr, the monarch will be destroyed: in the baroque theatre of cruelty history emerges as universal destruction, leading to a proliferation on stage of torture and death and corpses. In the baroque drama a young chaste woman, a princess, will represent the hope of restoration of order in the state as well as in the monarch's troubled soul and volcanic emotions; but she too will be victim. History is enacted as the hopelessness of the earthly condition without consolation or grace or salvation or redemption.

In the second half of the book 'Allegory and Trauerspiel', Benjamin observes that the baroque drama, in its bombast and excess and explicit confrontations, is opposed to the ideal of harmonious inwardness in classicism, to the values of clarity, brevity, grace, and beauty. Benjamin also anticipates Paul de Man and the deconstructionist and postmodern reprise of allegory in suggesting that allegory in baroque drama opposes the romantic notion of symbol, where the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole. Whereas in symbol the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in baroque allegory the observer is confronted with history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is emblematically expressed in a face in the form of a death's head, *facies hippocratica*.

Benjamin wishes to reprise the complexity of the modern form of allegory that developed in the sixteenth century. He notes that even great contemporary writers and theoreticians like Yeats still use the standard argument in neo-classical and romantic aesthetics alike that allegory is a conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning. If, however, says Benjamin, we look at the literary and visual emblem-books of the baroque period we can appreciate allegory as a distinctive mode of expression and writing that emphasizes riddle and enigma in pictorial signs, often perceived as akin to Egyptian hieroglyphs (though studied before the knowledge provided by the Rosetta Stone). The common hieroglyph emblem of the winged snake biting its own tail is used, for example, to signify the concept of time. Such emblematics might emphasize the grotesque, associating its effects with buried ruins and catacombs. In allegorical interpretation antinomies take plastic form in the conflict between cold, facile technique and eruptive expression. The didactic aspects that allegory might start out with become ever less clear as Egyptian, Greek, and Christian pictorial languages entwine. There is constant tension between the desire to codify, educate and instruct, and the baffling indirectness of exegesis.
The expression of an idea coincides, Benjamin points out, with a veritable eruption of images, giving rise to a chaotic mass of metaphors. In an interesting momentary touch of Orientalism, Benjamin writes that meaning, significance, rules through voluptuousness, like a stern sultan in a harem of objects.30

Connections between meaning and sign, idea and image, become bewilderingly obscure, as the one and the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a vice, indeed can arbitrarily signify more or less anything. The image is never more than a fragment, a rune. Any false appearance of totality is extinguished. Personifications and emblems offer themselves to view in desolate, sorrowful dispersal.31

Benjamin relates the conception of history in the mourning plays to the baroque cult of the ruin in the iconography of allegorical emblem books. History is recognized only under the sign of eternal transience. The baroque took pleasure in juxtaposing the statues of idols and the bones of the dead. In this guise history assumes the form of irresistible decay, and Benjamin cryptically notes that allegory is beyond beauty, that allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things. Nature is not seen in bud and bloom, but in over-ripeness and decay. Nature is always fallen. The baroque piles up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, which never comes. History—as fragments, remnants, images, metaphors, personifications—stays within ruins, which Benjamin refers to as the finest material of baroque creation; ruins which are consciously constructed.32

For Benjamin in the Trauerspielbuch history reveals no narrative of progress, and certainly nothing like a Hegelian dialectic. When, as Beatrice Hanssen points out, Benjamin suggests that there may be a redemptive promise in allegory even as it appears to fall into nothingness, he also admits that this may be allegory's last ironic dialectical trick.33 It is from fragments, unredeemed by totality or salvation, that we ceaselessly constitute and reconstitute allegorical histories.

**HISTORIA**

*John:* In another essay, we tracked metaphors in English historiographical writing, noting how often they are gendered and erotic (the male historian despairs that he cannot finally capture and penetrate the mysteries of the female past), and how often they destabilize the very argument they are meant to secure.34 In these historiographical works, the past is personified, implicitly, in allegorical terms, as Historia. Like any allegorical figure, Historia has a long and complex history herself.

When discussing early modern books of iconology, Benjamin refers to Cesare Ripa's remarkable Renaissance handbook, which has an emblematic
representation of Historia. In the introduction to his 1971 Dover edition, its full title *Cesare Ripa, Baroque and Rococo Pictorial Imagery: The 1758–60 Hertel edition of Ripa's 'Iconologia' with 200 engraved illustrations*, Edward A. Maser explains that Ripa, born in Perugia about 1560, published in 1593 in Rome his collection of allegories, personifications, and symbols, intended for artists, writers, poets, sculptors, theatrical designers, and builders of wedding and funeral decorations. At first it was in written form only, but from 1603 was illustrated. Various editions of Ripa's iconographic compendium spread throughout Western Europe, becoming the standard reference work for the representation of allegories. It made Ripa famous and he himself kept developing and expanding it for the rest of his life. The *Iconologia* was translated into many languages, French, German, Dutch, Spanish, and later editions would constantly add to and rework Ripa's original edition, which had, Maser suggests, a profound influence on literary and artistic thinking for over two centuries, only waning towards the end of the eighteenth century.

The Hertel edition of 1758–60, produced in Augsburg in Southern Germany, was, however, almost without written text and consisted of full-page illustrations. It drew on the ornamental engraving for which Augsburg in the eighteenth century was famous. The Hertel edition added new features, in particular the *fatto*, offering, in the background, an example of the main allegory in action in some well-known episode or personality. As well it added a Latin inscription and a German couplet explaining the story or personage used. The Hertel edition combined several alternative allegories into a single figure, as Ripa himself had suggested could be done. The plates were also framed with fantastical ornamental forms. Maser then tells us that in this his own edition he restores a short commentary drawing on the much longer commentaries that are included in many other editions, including Ripa's productions.

The palimpsestial mode of compilation and composition of the Dover edition can stand as a representation of the allegorical mode itself. In effect, there is no specifiable origin to an allegory. In his evocations of various allegorical figures, representing abstract ideas (of vices, virtues, characters, emotions) in visual terms, Ripa drew on a variety of sources—classical literature, the Bible, the bestiaries and encyclopedias of the Middle Ages, and books dealing with the pictorial writing of the ancient Egyptians. Later editions drew on Ripa and these and other sources, and added further commentaries and illustrations, emblems and exempla.36

In Benjamin's terms, we might say that in the iconography of Historia, history, as a perennially young woman, is connected to the ground of historical writing as the hope of fact, truth, and objectivity. Her relationship to time and transience, to death, cruelty, and violence (time is Saturn, or Chronos, eating the stone given him
instead of his son Jupiter, whom he planned to devour) is openly displayed. Eternity is connected to the sickle or pruning knife. Behind Historia and Time are ruins, perhaps suggesting the mighty pagan empires brought low by Time's scythe. Yet there is a Christian narrative as well in the *fatto* with its representation of Christ appearing to the two disciples walking to Emmaus. How do we relate this Christian story to the suggestion of Rome in the statue of the soldier on the ruined wall? Pagan and Christian representations and histories enigmatically jostle side by side. As Benjamin said, the multiplicity of examples, in fragments, lying amidst ruins, overwhelms any clarity and certainty of interpretation.

The allegories in the Dover edition of Hertel's edition of Ripa's iconography suggest multiple layering, so that in Benjamin's terms interpretation is always starting again in an irregular rhythm. Such can be likewise suggested of the allegorical mode of interpretation that much historical investigation reveals itself to be.

**CONVICT WOMEN: ALLEGORIES OF MODERN AUSTRALIA**

Ann: This understanding of allegory as an endless series of stories, of stories about stories, can be applied to any specific historiographical field. As a body of historical work builds and diversifies, the chances become increasingly remote of achieving the ideal of a written history with a mimetic relation to the past, of getting ever closer to the past as it was, or might have been. For as the historiography grows, we have a palimpsest, stories about the past that evoke and overlay and connect with and critique other such stories. The primary texts multiply, as more research is done, and their possible readings also multiply, as historians refer to each other and back to the primary texts, and to different parts of those texts, in the process creating an increasingly complex body of stories. Complicating matters further, the written histories speak not only to the primary texts, and to each other, but to their own times and concerns as well, so that we see in any series of historiographical texts traces of more recent times, speaking to and contradicting one another. Our histories, in this complex and intertextual way, even when we attempt to respect the alterity of the past, become allegories of the present.

I take as my example the emblematic figure of the convict woman in Australian historiography. We can see the convict woman as a continuing ironic double of the official allegorical figure of Australia as New Britannia. On the south side of the Sydney Town Hall there is a stained glass window created by Lucien Henry (a communard exiled to New Caledonia, who had come to Sydney after an 1879 amnesty) to celebrate the 1888 centennial of New South Wales. In its central panel is Australia, a portrait of a young woman, standing on top of the upper part of the globe with Oceania inscribed on it. Behind her head glow the rays of the sun. She
looks boldly at the future. She holds a trident and a miner’s lamp, with fleece and ram horns on and around her hair. Her iconography suggesting the colony’s wealth in wool and minerals and its connections to the treasures of the sea, Australia radiates confidence as emblem of settlement, development, and progress.37

Such confidence is absent from the haunted historiography of the convict woman, a figure who undergoes multiple transformations and reversals. Historiographical debates about the convict woman have been waged on a number of fronts, some of them rather curious for serious historical inquiry: her sexual morality, degree of criminality, and general character; her value as a worker and as a mother; her experiences of transportation and life as a convict and an ex-convict; her relations with state authority, and especially her transgression and rebelliousness, individual and collective; her relationships with officers, employers, and convict men; and her influence on subsequent gender relations in Australia.

The convict woman did not emerge as an historical figure until the 1950s. In the immediate aftermath of the convict period, as the convict past was put behind the growing colonies, there was little on the convict system included in most later nineteenth-century histories. While the notion of an evil system was elaborated in fiction in a popular tradition representing convict life as hell on earth—as in Australia’s most famous nineteenth-century novel, Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life*, and the stories of Price Warung—these, too, had little to say about convict women.38 And when in the early twentieth century written histories began to appear which were relatively sympathetic to the convicts, as in the work of George Arnold Wood, female convicts had still scarcely entered the story at all.39

The convict woman enters the historiography with the work in the 1950s of historians such as Manning Clark, Lloyd Robson, and A.G.L. Shaw, each of whom emphasized the criminality of the convicts. In their histories, the convict woman was a professional prostitute, evoked in highly moralistic terms as degraded, debauched, and drunken: a picture drawn from a range of sources written during the convict period by officers, surgeons, and other middle-class observers. From such sources an enduring lurid portrait emerged of the convict colonies constituting one large brothel, which, the contemporary observers thought, should be closed immediately.

Enter the feminist historians, especially Anne Summers’ best-selling *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, a foundational text for Australian feminist historiography. Speaking from the perspective of early 1970s women’s liberation, Summers accepted the verdict of her predecessors of the convict system as Gothic, but reversed the sympathies. The women were all
prostitutes, but this was the fault of an evil order which permitted them no alternatives. The colonies were a place of debauchery and sexual coercion of various kinds: again, early New South Wales as a giant brothel, run by the 'imperial whoremaster'. The convict women, though, could offer resistance, and did so in the Female Factories established to house those unable to work on assignment. Another feminist historian writing at the same time, Miriam Dixson, saw the convict women as the victims of victims, prey to low self-esteem, 'a deeply crippled self vision', which has been passed on through generations of Australian women since. In the same vein were the Australian film Journey Among Women (1977) and the TV mini-series Against the Wind (1978), made soon after the appearance of these books, both depicting a brutal system, especially dangerous for convict women. There is something of the notion of a Gothic island of horrors in all these texts, whether we take the viewpoint of the male contemporary commentator or mid-twentieth-century male historian recoiling with distaste from the convict women they see, or whether we take that of the feminist historians which took the side of the women, seeing them as victims of a vicious patriarchal system.

Meanwhile, a different historiography was developing, some of it rethinking the convict system as a whole. Michael Sturma pointed out that all this historiography, men's and women's, was based on a misunderstanding of the use of the term 'prostitute' in the original sources, for it meant simply unmarried sexual relations, including monogamous cohabitation, as well as sex for sale. John Hirst, in Convict Society and its Enemies, also warned against uncritical use of nineteenth-century descriptions of convict society. He pointed out how often the picture of corrupt masters, a brutal system, and degraded convicts, was drawn by opponents of transportation setting out to discredit the entire system. It is from these critical observers that we gain the image of New South Wales as a giant brothel, run by, in Anne Summers' wonderful allegorical personification, the 'imperial whoremaster'. A group of women historians began to rehabilitate the convict woman, emphasizing her effectiveness as a worker, and as wife, companion, and mother, so that the first generation of non-indigenous native born were generally agreed to be healthy, non-criminal, and hard working. Portia Robinson and others wanted to rescue the convict woman from the epithets of harlot, strumpet, and whore that the male commentators and historians had allocated her. The convict woman, they wanted to say, conformed rather better to middle-class norms and values than has been generally recognized. Whatever her life in Britain, she became a more or less reformed character in the colonies.

Robert Hughes' The Fatal Shore (1987) combined elements of all previous scholarship. Hughes uses sources he
himself suggests are suspect to create his own painting of hell, a lurid portrait of lust, drunkenness, and degradation. On the voyage out, as he depicts it, the women had frequent intercourse with the seamen and marines. After quoting a ship's surgeon's description of such scenes, Hughes comments: 'It sounds like bedlam, and probably it was.' When the women landed at Sydney Cove, two weeks after the men, and the convict men and women could get together for the first time, there were scenes of riot and debauchery all night. This was accompanied by a storm; the women floundering through a 'rain-lashed bog', pursued by male convicts intent on rape, as a 'lightning bolt split a tree in the middle of the camp and killed several sheep and a pig beneath it'. He goes on: 'And as the couples rutted between the rocks, guts burning from the harsh Brazilian aguardiente, their clothes slimy with red clay, the sexual history of colonial Australia may fairly be said to have begun'.

Hughes described the ship-board selection of women convicts to be servants as a 'slave market', and emphasized the helplessness of the women just as Anne Summers had done. The Parramatta Female Factory was a scene of 'disgusting squalor'; women were subject to degrading language, and—now sounding like Miriam Dixson—he feels that 'the pervasive belief in their whorishness and worthlessness must have struck deep into the souls of these women'. He paid special attention to Norfolk Island, a place of secondary punishment: 'In such an amoral environment, although male convicts had some rights (however attenuated), the women had none except the right to be fed; they had to fend for themselves against both guards and male prisoners.' While flogging of women was rare in New South Wales and Tasmania, it was common on Norfolk Island, and Hughes devotes time to describing the chief gaoler's 'love of watching women in their agony while receiving a punishment on the Triangle'. By far the best known of any of these texts, The Fatal Shore thus combines, with an evident appreciation of the spectacle, the moral condemnation of the nineteenth-century male commentators and twentieth-century male historians, with an older popular tradition which saw the convict system as entirely evil, with a feminist sympathy for the powerless and exploited convict woman.

The convict woman has continued to fascinate historians in the 1990s. Deborah Oxley's Convict Maids vigorously attacked the whole historical tradition of trying to decide if the convict women were 'good' or 'bad', as if that were a proper historical question. 'Convict women', she writes, 'have been divided into two camps, the wholesome and the depraved, paralleling the divide between casual and undeserving which in turn reflected women who were either passive or aggressive. This is a preoccupation with character, but does character matter? Character is not independent of circumstances.' Oxley then explores the
textual sources of the negative views of the male historians of the 1950s, Clark, Robson, and Shaw, arguing that they were especially influenced by Henry Mayhew, whose *London Labour and the London Poor*, then recently reissued, drew a sharp distinction between honest worker and member of a special criminal class. When this dichotomy was applied to women, it led to a view of convict, 'criminal', women as abandoned prostitutes. As she puts it, recalling Benjamin and Hayden White's stress on history as representation: 'Mayhew enters the stage on the third page of Robson's book, and never leaves.' She also demonstrates that in terms of occupational skills and experience, the female convicts were similar to the rest of the society from which they came. In her history, convict women become ordinary working-class and rural women, whose crimes emerged directly from their situation.48

Joy Damousi in her poststructuralist history *Depraved and Disorderly*, influenced by Foucault's focus on discourse, looks again at the nineteenth-century male observers, returning their gaze. Damousi detects in their accounts of the convict woman various sexual and other anxieties, a mixture of repulsion, fear, and fascination. She quotes the comments of Godfrey Charles Mundy, after a visit to the female factory at the Cascades, outside Hobart, in January 1851; referring to a young pretty convict woman in a solitary cell, he describes her as 'very beautiful in feature and complexion—but it was the fierce beauty of the wild cat!' She notes these observers' preoccupation with women's 'filth' and disease, and with the women's sexuality—in Damousi's terms its 'assertiveness, power and danger'.49 Damousi also looks for examples of transgression and resistance, through song, dance, joke, laughter, and rude language, and at times organized riot and rebellion.

In *Convict Women* (1998) Kay Daniels also focusses on the rough culture of convict women, and their engagement with the state, the forms of authority they encountered as convicts. In her very historiographically reflective book, Daniels opposes the notion of a coherent system or colonial policy, emphasizing the practical limitations on the vision and power of the convict administration. Officials, she points out, had to grapple with the presence of women in a largely male penal colony, constantly meeting problems and issues—for example sexual relationships between the convict women—with which they were ill-equipped to deal. While drawing attention to the means whereby convict women contested state authority, Daniels also maintains an emphasis on their substantial vulnerability—'economic, sexual, legal, domestic'.50

All these histories tell stories about the past as a way of pondering the present. All create the emblematic convict woman to suit their own times, in ways that might be clear, or may be obscure and eccentric.
The debauched whore of the 1950s and 1960s may be a figure of the imagination of male historians similar in some ways in class and outlook to the male observers whose accounts they relied on, and confident enough—and perhaps distanced from their society enough—to say unpleasant things about the convicts. The sexual slaves of the feminist imagination of the 1970s might express the anger of young feminist historians at their own treatment in their society, searching for a reason and a history for that inequality. The good wives and mothers of the women's historians of the 1980s gave women a history not to be ashamed of, incorporating convict women within a popular pioneer legend. The rebellious and economically valuable women engaged with the confused and contradictory forces of state power who emerge in 1990s histories perhaps allow dreams of transgression in the past where little seems effectively possible in the present. All these women are ultimately allegorical figures, bearing complex relations to the historical sources and to each other. An allegorical reading of the texts in which they appear enables a richer reading than might otherwise be possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Ann and John: The girl and boy detectives of clues and traces of remnants and ruins finally meet, and have only inconclusive final fragments to offer. A final digression (Methode ist Umweg).

Conventional Western historiography has stubbornly aligned its project and being with classical ideals of writing (not necessarily brevity, but there has been some interest in grace and beauty, and certainly clarity). Conventional Western historiography has placed itself high on the neo-classical hierarchy of genres that established itself from the later seventeenth century, whereby, in terms of Benjamin's Trauerspielbuch, baroque allegory was relegated to dusty desuetude, though recovered and transformed in early twentieth-century expressionism. As Bakhtin argues, genres like the carnival-grotesque, satire, fable, and popular stage burlesque were also considered low, as other to true art and knowledge; though many such genres have been revisited in late twentieth-century postmodernism. Where so much twentieth-century writing has betrayed or outraged neo-classical ideals, conventional Western historiography has, in its loyalty and fidelity, positioned itself as their true and abiding and increasingly lonely heir.

In its formative period in the nineteenth-century conventional historiography drew on, and has stubbornly continued to draw on, a realist epistemology and the realist novel. Yet it was and remains realism for the purposes of illusion, the illusion that first the documents and then the historian can tell us what actually happened. If the desire for 'lifelike representation' seemed to the scholarly writers of the eighteenth century, and to many in the twentieth, a contradiction in terms, it held a growing
fascination in the nineteenth. Various manifestations of this desire to represent, to faithfully replicate, the real, of which History was one, emerged around the same time: as Stephen Bann points out, the 1820s saw the publication of a major foundational text on the art of taxidermy, Niepce's first photographic image and Daguerre's historical diorama, as well as Ranke's famous preface urging historians to 'show only what actually happened'. Taxidermy—the curious art of preparing and mounting animal skins in a lifelike manner—was a major scientific activity of the nineteenth century; as an act of collection and representation, it at once depended on, and aimed to transcend, death itself. History and taxidermy both attempted, in the words of Tom Griffiths, 'to reinvigorate the dead skin of the past so that it could represent, even make a monument of, ephemeral reality'.

History may also have been influenced by the Egyptology, not to say Egyptomania, of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Nietzsche's dismissive comment about historians—'I have no patience with mummies who try to mimic life'—suggests. In Egyptology we find a less clearly realist tradition, a desire to defy death which was at once literal—the preservation of the mummified body—and fantastical. Such Janus-faced desire has been profound both for history and for other major cultural forms of modernity, such as film. As film historian Antonia Lant points out, nineteenth-century Egyptology had a long history before film, in lantern shows, panoramas, dioramas, photographs, and photographic criticism. In the subsequent development of silent film there was, Lant argues, a perceived association between the darkness of the cinema and that of the Egyptian tomb, with film as a ghostly world that speaks a pictorial language, a hieroglyphics revealed by light; there was an alliance between modern sexuality, particularly female screen sexuality, and myths of the sphinx and its silent unreadability, as well as the mysteries of Isis, offering possibilities of non-normative Eros. Egypt paralleled cinema in serving as the portal to the revelation of mystery and the fantastic. Egyptology offered to modernity a realist ideal of the representation of the dead as alive. But Egyptology also offered modernity excess and uncertainty and instability of meaning. As Lant suggests, the association with Egypt gave to cinema its enduring 'twin realist and fantastic character'.

The impulse to realism from Egyptology continued in post-World War II film. Noted for his realist theory of cinema, Jacques Bazin proposed in 1945 that the origin of all the plastic arts might be a mummy complex, a fundamental psychic need to reverse the finality of death. Bazin urged cinema to strive for the greatest evocation of reality possible. He therefore opposed non-realist aesthetic movements, in German Expressionism, Soviet montage, surrealism, abstraction. He championed filmmakers who placed their
faith in reality rather than the image. He impugned metaphor. He recognized, however, that he was proposing a contradiction: for when cinema became identical with reality it ceased to exist as cinema. But cinema, Bazin felt, had to follow an essential human drive, to preserve life by the presentation of life, and the harbinger of such preservation in history was Egyptian embalmment; for Bazin, the process of image making was equivalent to forming a death mask, a mould.58

If cinema has a twin realist and fantastical character, as Lant suggests, so too has the historiography of Western modernity. Like the realist film, conventional historical discourse exhibits a desire for mimesis, seeking to make historical writing itself disappear as a presence on the page. Yet historical writing, because it is writing, is always associated with conventions (citations, references to other historians, discussion of sources) and with features of language (metaphor and rhetoric and allegory) that lead to narrative and interpretive excess: the artifice of historical writing itself; the artifice that is, says Benjamin, a major feature of the baroque allegorical tradition.59

In a long romance with the mummy complex, conventional Western historiography embodies a desire to search into the darkness of the past in order to bring to light its past figures as if mysteriously still alive. Yet that past, so often conceived as female, always refuses to reveal itself fully. In the prologue to the Trauerspielbuch Benjamin makes play with the implications of the Platonic declaration that truth is beautiful. Truth, he thinks, is not so much beautiful in itself; as for whomsoever seeks it. Though truth as beauty provokes pursuit by the intellect, 'beauty will always flee: in dread before the intellect, in fear before the lover'.60 In similar terms we can say that Historia always flees the Western historiography that pursues it and tries to possess it within a realist cognition and aesthetic. Historia shimmers between multiple contradictory images of time, death, and ruins; it appears in many forms and guises, not just as hoped-for helpful Clio, but as riddling Sphinx, mysterious Isis, angry Medusa—kaleidoscopic Convict Woman—threatening bafflement and death to mimesis' singleness of vision, purpose, desire.

Allegory, as both a tradition of interpretation and a body of textuality, brings out into open theatricality and reflexivity the irreducible enigmatic doubleness of historiography as mimesis and fantasticality. ~

ANN CURTHOYS
Ann Curthoys is Manning Clark Professor of History at the Australian National University

JOHN DOCKER
John Docker is Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University
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NOTES

7 Partner, 'Making Up Lost Time', p. 92.
11 The Genealogy of Morals, 8 xxvi, 1887.
14 Partner, 'Making Up Lost Time', p. 97
15 Partner, 'Making Up Lost Time', pp. 94, 105, for 'evidence'.
ANN CURTHOYS AND JOHN DOCKER


Brodersen, Walter Benjamin ..., pp. 144-57, tells the story of the rejection of Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels as an Habilitation thesis, thus ending any hopes Benjamin might have had for an academic career.


TIME, ETERNITY, TRUTH, AND DEATH


20 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 171, 175, 181.


33 Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, p. 79.


51 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 164.


59 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 82.

60 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 31.