

Introduction

Insupportable Absence and the Writing of Desire

Most of our longings go unfulfilled. This is the word's wistful implications—a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach.

DON DELILLO, *Underworld*

Language and Narrative Desire

Toward the end of *Underworld*, the novel's central figure, Nick Shay, reflects on the meaning of the word “longing,” on why it is, as he puts it, that “most of our longings go unfulfilled.” He argues that “this is the word's wistful implications—a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach” (803). This book should be regarded as an inquiry into the wistful implications of longing that DeLillo speaks of, an examination of the various ways in which the “desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach” is mapped out in five nineteenth-century narratives: Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44), William Thackeray's *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), and, finally, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the*

Obscure (1895). I have characterized these narratives as mapping out the various shapes of desire, but “desire” is a term frequently invoked to refer to a wide range of specific ends or objects—political or economic power, for example, or sexual fulfillment, personal freedom, and so on.¹ When I speak of desire, however, I am referring specifically to desire as Jacques Lacan has theorized it, and, in fact, when Nick Shay describes the “wistful implications” of longing and how it always involves “a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach,” his understanding of desire closely resembles Lacan’s. But while DeLillo’s character ponders this question for only a moment, Lacan examines it throughout his writings, and I return to Lacan and desire later in the introduction. At this point, I want to look at the narratives themselves and the ways in which I approach them.

While each of these narratives considers the question of desire, each does so in its own way, and thus I have tried to heed Lacan’s admonition that we “start from the text, start by treating it, as Freud does and he recommends, as Holy Writ” (*Seminar II*, 153), for I am persuaded that whatever we say as readers must begin with the text.² “Critique,” J. Hillis Miller reminds us, “is a testing of the grounding of language in this or that particular text, not in the abstract or in abstraction from any particular case,” and, as he also notes, any “attempt to take the language of literature for granted and shift from the study of word with word to the study of the relations of words with things or subjectivities, will only lead back in the end to the study of language” (“Search,” 31). When, however, the texts in question are Victorian narratives, this “study of word with word” can seem like an overwhelming task. As Robert Polhemus has noted, “One of the greatest problems in literary studies is that the prose of a long novel can be as dense and highly charged as the language of poetry,” but because “we cannot give the language of huge novels the intense scrutiny we give to a few lines of verse, our study of fiction . . . has been comparatively spotty and superficial” (*Comic*, 21). While it is difficult to approach novels with the same “intense scrutiny” that we are able to give, for example, to poetry, we must nevertheless make the effort (as Polhemus certainly does), for when we read the books that nineteenth-century novelists wrote instead of those that we think they should have written or those that we have been told they wrote, the books often astound us not only by the resonance and range of their language, but also by their ability to take us to strange and haunting places.

The earliest text examined in this study, Charles Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44), was published more than a decade before Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, while the latest, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), was published shortly before the turn of the century. Dickens was only seven years old when John Keats, himself but twenty-four years old and already dying of tuberculosis, was writing his great odes in 1819, while Thomas Hardy, born in 1840, lived long enough into the twentieth century to read a popular exposition of Einstein's *Theory of Relativity* late in his life.³ But however differently these five writers might have inhabited the nineteenth century, they were all children of their age, and thus I am mindful of William Baker's admonition that we must keep such genealogies in mind and not impose "Lacan, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva et al. in an ahistorical fashion," and that we should avoid, as he puts it, the "imposition of ideas from other cultures, traditions, and generations" ("Afterword," 232). And although I have drawn extensively on the theoretical inquiries of Freud and Lacan, and have turned at one point or another to virtually all of the writers identified by Baker, I would nevertheless agree with what he has to say, adding only that what we need to guard against is not the application of ideas from other cultures or traditions, but rather careless or casual applications.

When Freud turns toward artists as different as Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Leonardo da Vinci, or when Lacan similarly explores the dynamics of desire in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Edgar Allen Poe's "The Purloined Letter," they do so because they are persuaded, as am I, that desire insinuates itself in complex but discernible ways into the varied narrative histories of all human subjects. Victorian texts continue to surprise us, and we need to be wary of drawing too many sharp distinctions between their age and our own. At one point in *David Copperfield*, for example, Dickens describes the schoolmaster, Mr. Creakle, noting his "delight at cutting at the boys, which was like the *satisfaction of a craving appetite*" (91, emphasis mine). He also tells us that Creakle "couldn't resist a chubby boy, especially; that *there was a fascination in such a subject, which made him restless in his mind*, until he had scored and marked him for the day" (91, emphasis mine). Freud's essay "A Child Is Beaten" and his other inquiries into sadism and fetishism, as well as James Kincaid's work on the Victorian eroticization of the child, might help open up or gloss this passage, but it is Dickens's richly precise and disturbing

language that lays bare Creakle's sadistic and compulsive pedophilic appetites.⁴ This moment remains Dickens's, and his alone, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to "impose" twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory on a text in which the sexual dynamics interrogated by that theory resonate so powerfully.

The writers examined in this study are situated in historical moments that defined and to some extent shaped the directions of their art, for while each artist tells the story of desire in his or her own way, the choices the writers make, the metaphors they draw on, and the narratives they weave depended in no small part on their own personal histories and the various cultural sites in which their writing was located. Studies that have examined the relationship between writers and these locations, such as Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* and Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867*, have shown that such examinations can yield fruitful readings of the nineteenth-century British novel. My readings of the five narratives in the chapters that follow are, I hope, grounded on a similar awareness of the importance of such historical moments and sites. Thus, it does matter, for example, that Elizabeth Gaskell writes *Ruth* at a moment in British history when the question of prostitution seemed to dominate both political and social discourse, or that Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* both gives voice to and is haunted by that lassitude or malaise that permeates the later decades of the nineteenth century. But as Jacques Derrida and others have reminded us, we need to be careful in drawing on such sites, for they are themselves texts, no less than the texts they are sometimes used to ground or stabilize. In speaking of Rousseau's *Confessions*, for example, Derrida argues that we cannot move outside the text to get to the "real" Rousseau, for "there is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]" (*Of Grammatology*, 158). This is so not because we are uninterested in the life of Rousseau or Mama or Thérèse, but because "there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references" (158-59).⁵

Such cautionary notes aside, however, I am arguing that if we try to regard our sense of the historical reality or cultural context in which artists

write as the final ground of meaning for their texts, we come to realize the inadequacies of such an approach, for figural language and the inscription of desire in it contest or destabilize the historical, disturbing texts in such ways as to modify the ways in which we can understand their relationship to such sites. As we will see in chapter 2, for example, Thackeray shared with his age a number of the attitudes toward race and empire that we find expressed in William Kinglake's *Eothen*, and he actually speaks admiringly of Kinglake's book in his *Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo*. Nevertheless, the power and strange beauty of his narrative are only remotely connected to such attitudes, but arise instead from a desire that has its origin in wounds that Thackeray's language explores and articulates, even as the narrative voice remains only obscurely aware of them. The existence of the unconscious, what Freud referred to as a "new place," "*ein anderer Schauplatz*," or another scene, means that we inhabit a split or divided subjectivity, and that we therefore often write from sites of which we remain unconscious.⁶ As Freud often admits, artists were familiar with this "new place" long before he discovered it, as when, for example, Charlotte Brontë writes in her 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights* of how "the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always the master—something that strangely wills and works for itself" (40). Such strange workings, as we will see, are much in evidence in Thackeray's narrative.

Now, however, I would like to turn to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), looking at the ways in which the presence of an unnamed but nevertheless articulated desire in its language punctures or unravels the tight weave of its narrative frame. *Robinson Crusoe* is a considerably earlier text than the others I consider, but it is exemplary not only in the ways in which its language alerts us to the presence of Freud's "new place," but also in how it contests our attempts to read the text strictly along materialist or historicist lines. It is not that we should attempt to separate his text from the eighteenth-century sites of capitalism and commerce in which it is situated, but rather that we should recognize that we cannot understand it solely through such sites. The section of the novel I look at occurs after Crusoe has been on the island for almost twenty-five years and hears one night offshore the sounds of gunfire associated with a ship in distress. He awakens the next morning to discover that there has indeed been a shipwreck but no survivors, the ship having foundered on the same concealed

rocks that had once enabled him to salvage much from his own ship before it finally sank. As he comes to realize his own good fortune, Crusoe praises God's providential design: "It is very rare that the providence of God casts us into any condition of life so low, or any misery so great, but that we may see something or other to be thankful for; and may see others in worse circumstances than ourselves" (192).

As he continues to look out on this fatal watery scene, however, he becomes intensely but peculiarly aware of his isolation: "I cannot," he writes, "explain by any possible energy of words what *a strange longing or hankering of desires* I felt in my soul upon this sight" (192, emphasis mine). "In all the time of my solitary life," he adds, "I never felt so earnest, so strong a desire after the society of my fellow-creatures, or so deep a regret at the want of it" (192). At this point, Crusoe begins to reflect on the mysterious origins of such "a strange longing or hankering of desires": "There are some secret moving springs in the affections, which when they are set a-going by some object in view, or be it some object, though not in view, yet render'd present to the mind by the power of imagination, that motion carries out the soul by its impetuosity to such violent eager embracings of the object that the absence of it is insupportable" (193). Desire, he suggests, is set into motion by "some secret moving springs in the affections," which, once "set a-going," carry the soul in impetuous and peculiar directions toward such "violent eager embracings of the object" that its absence, as he puts it, "is insupportable." In some respects, this account of the origin and directions of desire corresponds fairly closely to what is happening to Crusoe himself, the object in question in his case being, of course, the ship and the human companionship that it promised to hold. But Crusoe's remarks, although occasioned by this particular moment, also raise some important questions involving the nature of desire itself, for what is especially striking or curious about this scene is not the nature of his feelings, but rather the ways in which it calls our attention to their obscure or ambiguous origins. Clearly the prospect of "the society of my fellow-creatures," first raised and then dashed by the violence of a capricious sea, would be enough to unsettle anyone who had been alone for as long as Crusoe had been. And yet, by emphasizing the "strange longing or hankering of desires," the scene resists this explanation, or, more precisely, it resists our inclination to accept just this explanation. The ways in which Crusoe's language emphasizes his

bewilderment make us attentive and curious as to why he should be confused and baffled. Why call our attention, in other words, to the strangeness of his longings when what he wants—namely, the company of other human beings—would seem to be so self-evident and understandable?

Nevertheless, his body, as well as his language, registers the obscure conflicts with which this scene is invested, for as Crusoe imagines the possibility of even one survivor, he writes of how “the desires were so moved by it that when I spoke the words my hands would clinch together and my fingers press the palms of my hands, that if I had had any soft thing in my hand, it would have crushed it involuntarily” (193). Again, he is able to tell us what he does, but he cannot tell us why: “Let the naturalists explain these things, and the reason and manner of them,” he writes. “All I can say to them is to describe the fact, which was even surprising to me when I found it” (193). Genuinely astonished not only by what he is feeling, but by his very gestures, their presence as well as their origin, Crusoe confesses that he cannot explain them or account for them—“I knew not from what it should proceed”—and because, as he admits, his own language fails him, he turns to other discourses, such as that of naturalists, in hopes of finding out what is going on. At one point he attempts to account for his anguish by suggesting that it arises from his “ardent wishes” for “the conversation of one of my fellow-Christians” (193), but his remarks here are finally unconvincing, suggesting that Crusoe, although seeking some explanation, is no more convinced by the reasons he advances than he believes that “naturalists” could actually explain what is happening to him. Narrative, Peter Brooks has suggested, is “condemned to saying other than what it would mean” (56), and Crusoe’s narrative registers the pressure of this condemnation.

Freud discovered the unconscious in language by listening carefully to the spoken word, paying attention not only to what was said but also to *how* it was said, especially to the places in which a text stumbles, in which we detect semantic lurches or erratic movements.⁷ This scene from *Robinson Crusoe*, I would suggest, is characterized precisely by such stumbles and discontinuities, giving us the sense that there is something unusual about it, something not quite right.⁸ For Freud, Jacqueline Rose has argued, language “was always redolent of what is both hardest to articulate and most pressingly in need of speech” (*States of Fantasy*, 149), and we find such a language in this passage, for its narrative impulses direct our attention to

something that is felt but not understood, to something in the passage that fractures or agitates whatever logical or reasonable explanations might be applied to it, either by Crusoe or ourselves. It is not, as Crusoe realizes, that such explanations would be wrong, but rather that they would be incomplete or lacking, and what they would lack is precisely the ability to get at the fundamental but unconscious presence of lack or loss itself, as desire makes itself felt by means of the pressure exerted on a language through which it momentarily escapes. Drawing on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Lacan has argued that the unconscious is “a discovery [that] becomes a rediscovery and, furthermore, is always ready to steal away again, thus establishing the dimension of loss” (*Concepts*, 25). A “dimension of loss” saturates this scene from *Robinson Crusoe*, but what it is that has been lost remains problematic and elusive, for while we are most certainly talking about the loss of human companionship, something more is involved as well, a surplus of meaning that refuses to be silenced or denied.

And it is, I would argue, psychoanalysis rather than historicism that enables us to identify what this lack or loss might be. For what is disclosed here is precisely the ways in which desire lacerates the appearances and things of this world, testifying to a want or gap in the human subject that the world and its structures and sites can never fill in or satisfy. For although Robinson Crusoe at first considers himself providentially blessed as he looks on the foundering ship, thinking of how he avoided the death that befell this ship’s mariners, he almost immediately also comes to feel or know another loss or death, namely, the loss of that part of himself from which he is forever removed—what Lacan refers to as the “objet a,” that from which we must be separated if we are to be constituted as a subject in language. Crusoe’s reactions during this scene, characterized as they are by a powerful feeling of being incapacitated, disabled, and disoriented, correspond in many ways to Freud’s description of the act of mourning, when the world as we have known it is suddenly shattered and we are unable to negotiate the new one thrust on us. Mourning is how we attempt to cope with the hole in the real caused by loss or death, or, as Lacan puts it, “The work of mourning is first of all performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of the signifying elements to cope with the hole that has been created in existence” (“Desire,” 38). But, at the same time, as he points out, mourning “impeaches” the “systems of signifiers in their totality” (38), for it dis-

closes the fact that the symbolic cannot heal or close such a hole. We draw on the symbolic in order to patch up the holes in our lives, to repair or heal the tears or wounds of human subjectivity itself, but there is always something that escapes its nets, a surplus, as it were, that refuses to be contained. Readers of *Robinson Crusoe* have observed that it is a text in which the symbolic order, spelled out by the novel's numerous inventories of goods and descriptions of various mercantile systems of exchange, is tightly structured and drawn together, and historicist approaches toward Defoe's text have correctly identified the text's close relationship to the colonial and capitalist projects of eighteenth-century England.⁹ And yet, moments such as this one disclose the precariousness and final insufficiency of this symbolic order, and, in this respect, the moment becomes especially traumatic, similar to the dreams, hallucinations, and visions of cannibals and cannibalism that tear holes in the otherwise tightly knit fabric of Crusoe's narrative. Like the plaintively uncanny cry of Polly, his parrot, "Robin, Robin, Robin Crusoe, poor Robin Crusoe, where are you, Robin Crusoe? Where are you? Where have you been?" (152), this moment asks questions of Crusoe that he would just as soon not listen to, but questions that nevertheless insist on being heard.

This richly layered scene deserves more attention than I can give it here, but what I want to emphasize is how the language of Defoe's text discloses pressures, conflicts happening somewhere in such a way that, although Crusoe can feel their effects, he is confused or baffled by their presence. Unconscious desire makes itself known, Lacan suggests, in the moments "where the subject surprises himself in some unexpected way" (*Concepts*, 28), and this scene is riddled with surprise and bewilderment, disclosing the presence of another site or origin, that other place being the unconscious as the site of desire. Crusoe's stumbles, the discontinuities in the seams of his narrative, call our attention to important things happening on levels that are felt but not understood by the narrator. Similar moments, as we will see, are found in a number of the texts I will be looking at—a peculiar confrontation late in Dickens's novel, for example, between Tom Pinch and young Martin Chuzzlewit, in which much that is unsaid is nevertheless able to make itself known, or an episode in *A Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* in which Thackeray lingers in fascination over the disturbing image of a hidden trapdoor as he imagines the bodies of lovely young women who

have disappeared through it. There is also a particularly striking scene in *Jude the Obscure* in which the sight of Arabella's breasts and Jude's sudden lack of appetite for liquor become caught up together in the dynamics of conflicted desire. I am interested in that desire that has its origins in what Defoe refers to as "some secret moving springs in the affections," a desire that is often mysterious and violent, painful, impulsive, and, as we will see in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Ruth*, self-destructive as well. "The goals we pursue are always veiled," Milan Kundera tells us; "The thing that gives our every move its meaning is always totally unknown to us" (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 122). Like the desire identified by *Robinson Crusoe*, disclosed through an anxious narrative voice that confesses to its own perplexity and confusion, the desire I will be looking at most often remains veiled, making itself known only indirectly.

As we might expect, a number of nineteenth-century British writers other than those I will be looking at have also explored the shapes of this desire. Let me give a few brief examples. In "The Child in the House"—an essay I will in fact return to in chapter 2—Walter Pater writes of how its central figure, Florian Deleal, recalls his boyhood, describing how "a touch of regret or desire mingled all night in the remembered presence of red flowers, and their perfume in the darkness about him; and *the longing for some undivined, entire possession of them* was the beginning of a revelation to him, growing ever clearer" (1,474, emphasis mine). Or in the case of *Wuthering Heights*, when the revenant Cathy beats on the window beside Lockwood's bed, pleading to be let in and saying, "I'm come home. I'd lost my way on the moor" (67), we hear the desire to crash through separation or division that is behind the unnamable sense of loss that haunts both Cathy and Heathcliff to their graves. And, finally, in speaking of the conclusion to *The Mill on the Floss*, Garrett Stewart has noted that "George Eliot has drawn for us the reversionary desires that are death" (*Death Sentences*, 118); and when Maggie Tulliver tells her brother Tom of her fear that "everything is going away from us—the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning" (*The Mill on the Floss*, 325), she testifies to such reversionary desires, hungering for something that can be approached only asymptotically through the apocalyptic violence of death that enfolds brother and sister in its arms toward the end of the novel.¹⁰

However, one of the most sustained meditations on these particular aspects of desire is found in Amitav Ghosh's postmodern novel *The Shadow*

Lines (1988). At one point early in the novel, the narrator tells of a conversation that took place between his cousin and himself on the nature of “real desire”: “He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one’s mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror” (29). The cousin, Tridib, makes it clear that what he has in mind is not “greed or lust,” but “real desire,” that which is “pure, painful, and primitive.” Invoking the image of a damaged or pained body, Ghosh argues that desire has its origin in a wound or split, a fissure between oneself and the other, that which “was not in oneself.” Desire for Ghosh is a “torment of the flesh” that compels us to seek beyond ourselves, in other places or other times, for that which is more than ourselves, or that which possesses whatever it is that we do not have. As when Crusoe describes the crushing pressure of his fingers on his palms or when his teeth struck “together and set against one another so strong that for some time I could not part them again” (169), the torment that Ghosh speaks of can be painful, even wrenching. Ghosh’s narrator tells of how he listened to his cousin, “bewildered, wondering whether I would ever know anything at all, for I was not sure whether I would ever experience desire of that kind” (30). The five narratives I will be examining all testify to the fact that such desire does exist, but, at the same time, each also denies the existence of “a place where there was no border between oneself and one’s image in the mirror.” Instead, they argue that desire is grounded in a fundamental human lack, a tear in the fabric of being itself that can be known only indirectly or obliquely—as in, for example, our desire for a place without divisions or borders.

Lacan and the Structure of Desire

Like the longings DeLillo speaks of in the epigraph to this chapter, Ghosh’s account of the trajectory of desire is strikingly similar to desire as Lacan understands it, and thus this would be a good point to turn to the question of Lacanian desire. I would like, first of all, to indicate what I understand such desire to be, and, secondly, to identify more fully some of the directions that this study will be pursuing. While Lacan often turns to the question of

desire, he perhaps does so nowhere more effectively than in “The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power.” In this 1958 essay, Lacan sets out to “articulate that which structures desire” (*Écrits*, 263), and he does so in important ways. Desire, he writes, “is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows out within itself, in as much as the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the want to be, together with the appeal to receive the complement of the Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want, or lack” (*Écrits*, 263). At times Lacan’s style can be intimidating—he acknowledges at one point, in fact, that he prefers “to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult” (*Écrits*, 146). But in this case, the initial or apparent difficulty of the passage stems from the fact that Lacan says a good deal in a relatively small number of words. Desire, he tells us, is manifested or found “in the interval that demand hollows out within itself,” and makes itself known or felt through the articulation of the signifying chain, namely, through the ways in which language discloses or “brings to light” the “want to be,” or that “want of being” that Lacan refers to as “*manque à être*.” He also notes that this articulation of the signifying chain addresses or appeals to the “Other,” insofar as this other, “the locus of speech,” is also “the locus of this want, or lack.” As Lacan often reminds us, “desire” is distinct from both “need” and “demand,” for while need registers biological requirements on the part of the infant and demand the infant’s insistence that the parent or caretaker provide love and recognition as well as food and shelter, desire addresses the fact that such an insistence is always made from a position of lack or want, what Lacan often refers to as a gap (*béance*) or split.¹¹ Thus desire occupies the site or the interval that “demand hollows out within itself,” situated in the spaces structured by the fact that when we demand, we are always seeking or asking for something more than we can get, and also more than we even realize we are demanding. In his “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” (1949), Lacan explores some of the reasons for this particular trajectory of desire. In that early essay, he argues that the ego, or “I,” is structured around a series of illusory or mirror images of identity, what he refers to as “a succession of phantasies” (*Écrits*, 4). However, such images—for example, that image of wholeness and equilibrium that the infant sees when she looks in the mirror in a moment of what Lacan iden-

tifies as “spatial identification” (*Ecrits*, 4)—do not succeed in concealing or doing away with the child’s awareness of the fact that there is a profound difference between her own bodily self, filled with all of “the turbulent movements that the subject feels” (*Ecrits*, 2), and the illusory image of intactness and balance.

This sense of the fragmented body that is born at this time stays with us throughout our life, as it makes itself felt in our dreams, for example, or is captured on the canvasses of Hieronymus Bosch and Picasso. Similarly, the dialectics of Self and Other that are structured by this mirror stage do not end when we grow out of infancy. On the contrary, Lacan argues that the moment when the mirror stage itself comes to an end “decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other” (*Ecrits*, 5). In other words, we continue throughout our lives to seek in the Other that which we do not have, not knowing that this Other, similarly grounded in lack or want, does not and cannot possess that which we seek. Or, as Joan Copjec puts it, “Desire is produced not as a striving for something, but only as a striving for something else or something more. It stems from the feeling of our having been duped by language, cheated of something, not from our having been presented with a determinate object or goal for which we can aim” (*Read My Desire*, 55). This longing for something that might close or narrow this split or gap, giving us back what we have been cheated of, is precisely what Lacan means by desire.¹² Desire is neither need nor demand, but that which is beyond both, carved out in the hollows created by the fact that buried within our demands are certain requests or desires that cannot be answered.

As Copjec’s remarks suggest, desire makes itself felt and known in and through language, for language is born out of lack or want, and testifies by its presence to the fact that desire cannot be satisfied. Insofar as we are constructed by language, we are separated from any possibility of wholeness or intactness, or, as Lacan puts it in an often-cited passage, “The moment in which desire becomes human is also that in which the child is born into language” (*Ecrits*, 103). Desire thus makes itself felt through the signifying chain of language, always reaching unconsciously for that which it cannot have or be; it cannot be satisfied, for it is located at the point at which demand asks for something more than the need it expresses. In this respect, desire is metonymic, always the desire for something else, and, as Lacan

points out, it is especially when the need articulated by demand is met that we become most acutely deprived of the desire that lies behind this demand.¹³ Freud first glimpsed this relationship between language and desire as he watched his one-and-a-half-year-old grandson playing a game in which he tossed a spool into his bed and then pulled it back out with a string, saying “fort” (gone) or “da” (there) as he did so, in a gesture of play that allowed him to cope with his mother’s absence from the room. But, as Lacan notes, Freud saw in his grandson’s behavior much more than simply a child’s play: “Through the word—already a presence made of an absence—absence itself gives itself a name in that moment of origin whose perpetual recreation Freud’s genius detected in the play of the child. And from this pair of sounds modulated on presence and absence . . . there is born a world of meaning of a particular language in which the world of things will be arranged” (*Ecrits*, 65).¹⁴ In his final lecture in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1980, Lacan underscored the continuous and fundamental presence of Freud in his own work when he told his audience, “It’s up to you to be Lacanians, if you want. As for me, I am a Freudian.”¹⁵ And while I am not sure that I am a Freudian, Freud certainly occupies a prominent place in this study.

Like John Irwin in *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge*, I consider Freud’s writings as “problematical as any speculative philosophic writings” (2), and I too am interested in those areas of inquiry—for example, repetition compulsion, the death instinct, the nature of the uncanny, and the dynamics of mourning and melancholia—in which Freud, as Irwin puts it, “is at his most metaphysical, at his most philosophical” (2). But while Irwin’s study of Faulkner presents structures such as the Oedipus complex and the repetition compulsion in what he identifies as “their classically Freudian form, devoid of later revision” (4), I am also interested in Lacan’s return to Freud. As Juliet Mitchell notes, Lacan “dedicated himself to the task of refinding and reformulating the work of Sigmund Freud” (*Feminine Sexuality*, 1), convinced that the originality and radical nature of Freud’s thought had been lost or trivialized by an age that was unwilling to read what Freud actually wrote. In the seminars that he gave over the years, first at Hôpital Saint-Anne and then later at the École normale supérieure, Lacan attempted to recover Freud’s texts and to teach them to others, exploring the ways in which they constitute a fundamental redefinition of our place in the scheme of things.¹⁶

Among those who regularly attended the seminars that Lacan gave at Saint-Anne from 1953 onward was Michel Foucault, and, in fact, as David Macey notes, Foucault was “one of the first to bring to the rue d’Ulm news of the ‘return to Freud,’ or in other words of Lacan’s reformulation of psychoanalytic principles in the light of modern linguistics, anthropology, and philosophy and of his dismissing of the ‘ego-psychology’ which, he claimed, was reducing psychoanalysis to banal psycho-social engineering” (*The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 56). And although Macey also points out that Foucault had “a long and fraught relationship with psychoanalysis” (68), there is no doubt that Foucault, like Lacan, was fascinated by the abyss in which thought makes itself heard by agitating and disturbing the surface of language. I have had the opportunity on several occasions to draw on Foucault’s writings. His stunning analysis of the creation and control of docile bodies in his *Discipline and Punish*, for example, figures into my reading of *The Woman in White*, and my chapter on Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* is informed by his inquiry into the various dynamics of the “multiple, fragmentary, and mobile sexualities” (*The History of Sexuality*, 46) that we find in the Victorian age. In fact, any reading of nineteenth-century fiction concerned with the question of desire must recognize Foucault’s presence, if only to acknowledge the ways in which, until rather recently, his theories of power and sexuality have tended to be at the center of critical conversations concerning Victorian literature, with his followers arguing along historicist lines that we need to regard desire as an effect of cultural production.

Recent studies, however, such as Joan Copjec’s *Read My Desire* and Christopher Lane’s *The Burdens of Intimacy: Psychoanalysis and Victorian Masculinity*, have asked us to reopen the conversation between historicism and psychoanalysis. In her introduction to *Read My Desire*, for example, Copjec maintains that her arguments are less with Foucault in general than with the directions in his thought that move him away from a position he articulates elsewhere—namely, the notion of “a surplus existence that cannot be caught up in the positivity of the social” (4).¹⁷ Historicism, she suggests, persists in “the reduction of society to its indwelling network of relations and power” (6), and attempts “to ground being in appearance and wants to have nothing to do with desire,” (14), whereas psychoanalysis maintains not only that desire is real, but also that it can be articulated. Arguing against the notion of a metalanguage that can somehow exist outside of the structure it signifies,

she asks us to recognize that society is split “between its appearance—the positive relations we observe in it—and its being, that is to say, its generative principle, which cannot appear among these relations” (9). And in contemplating what she identifies as a notion of transcendence, “a principle or a subject that ‘transcends’ the regime that he [Foucault] analyzes” (7), Copjec turns to Lacan’s discourses and concept of the real as well as to Freud’s analyses of such concepts as the primal father and the death wish. Without such a notion of transcendence, she maintains, social space cannot help but be reduced to the “relations that fill it” (7), and it is psychoanalysis, and especially the work of Lacan, that enables us to understand the constraints of such an approach.

Although Copjec addresses what she considers to be the essential or fundamental differences between psychoanalysis and historicism, other readers have asked us to acknowledge the fact that the projects of Freud and Foucault are not necessarily at odds with one another. Thus, although she concedes the differences between historicism and psychoanalysis, Ann Laura Stoler argues in *Race and the Education of Desire* that “there are surprising ways in which their [Freud’s and Foucault’s] projects can and do converge” (168–69).¹⁸ Christopher Lane develops this argument further in *The Burdens of Intimacy*, noting that while readers often speak of Foucault’s remark in *Madness and Civilization* (1961) to the effect that psychoanalysis “has not been able, will not be able, to hear the voices of unreason” (*Madness*, 278), they tend to ignore his later comments in *The Order of Things* (1966) that would seem to say “*the exact opposite*” (*Burdens*, 21, emphasis Lane’s). In this later work, Foucault speaks of the relationship of psychoanalysis to the human sciences, arguing that psychoanalysis, by “setting itself the task of making the discourse of the unconscious speak through consciousness” (*Order of Things*, 374), advances “in the direction of that fundamental region in which the relations of representation and finitude come into play” (374). In this respect, Foucault stresses, there is a fundamental difference between psychoanalysis and other areas of inquiry, for while the other human sciences “advance towards the unconscious only with their back to it,” psychoanalysis “points directly towards it, with a deliberate purpose,” toward “what is there and yet is hidden, toward what exists with the mute solidity of a thing, of a text closed in upon itself, or of a blank space in a visible text, and uses that quality to defend itself” (374).¹⁹ Many followers of Foucault,

Lane remarks, underestimate the proximity “between Foucault and Freud” (4), and he adds that, given the existence of such rich passages as this one, “it is odd that many Anglo-American readers of Foucault have consistently ignored this dimension of his work” (22). Foucault may not have been, in Lane’s words, “a closet Freudian” (21), but he was certainly not the enemy of Freud that he is often made out to be.

The reading of Victorian fiction is a project certainly large enough and complex enough to accommodate a multiplicity of voices, for if, as I am arguing, we cannot understand a text by attempting to ground it wholly in its historical or cultural sites, neither can we read such texts satisfactorily without an awareness of these sites. As John Bowen has noted, it is precisely the resistance of literary texts “to be interpreted by a consistent set of principles and methods” that constitutes “the (paradoxical) condition of their (impossible) condition” (*Other Dickens*, 2), and we should celebrate this paradoxical, impossible, and resistant nature of textuality. The act of reading asks us to remain open to the possibility of doubt, uncertainty, even disorientation, and I do not for a moment believe that the approach taken in this study (or any other single approach for that matter) establishes the ways in which all texts can or should be read or explored.

The Textual Unconscious and Five Narratives of Desire

“Dehiscence” is a term botanists use to describe the process in which a seed or pod, when it splits open, develops a gaping hole or wound. Lacan draws on this term in characterizing the human condition, when he speaks of the human subject as a figure of “dehiscence within the world” (*Seminar II*, 166). But if language testifies to our wounded relationship with the world, it also grounds our being in it, and because both Freud and Lacan emphasize the fact that unconscious desire makes itself known through language, their inquiries have particular meaning for students of literature.²⁰ As Ned Lukacher has suggested, although “the future of psychoanalysis as a therapy is likely to remain in question for some time to come, its theoretical and textual relation to literary and philosophic history should not be regarded as either inconsequential or obvious.” Lukacher argues, in fact, that in the case of psychoanalysis, “its interpretive rather than therapeutic ends may finally predominate” (*Primal Scenes*, 23).²¹ These interpretive ends, however, are often

ambiguous, indeterminate. Foucault, for example, has spoken of the “structurally open, structurally gaping character of interpretation” (“Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” 3), and in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes of how there is “at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown” (143, 564). As readers of literary texts, we often come into contact with such navels, sites of the mysterious and unknowable, but the presence of these black holes in literary texts should be every bit as exhilarating as their existence within the universe.

As Steven Hawking and others have pointed out, cosmic black holes, because of their density, draw everything into themselves, allowing nothing, including light itself, to escape, and thus they can be studied only indirectly, by observing, for example, the often peculiar and violent activity taking place around them.²² And in his *A Theory of Literary Production*, Pierre Macherey has argued that literary texts have their own black holes, their own sites of conflict and tension, suggesting that we must seek their meaning as well through indirect gestures and signs, through the silences and ruptures disclosed by the text. In order to “reach utterance,” he observes, “all speech envelops itself in the unspoken,” and thus for a book to say some things, “there are other things that must not be said” (85). And just as Lacan argues that Freud’s discovery of the unconscious implies the vision of a split or decentered human subjectivity, Macherey similarly locates in the literary text evidence of a schism or division, what he refers to as its textual unconscious: “We must show,” he writes, “a sort of splitting from within the work: this division is its unconscious” (92). It is “not a question of redoubling the work with an unconscious, but a question of revealing in the very gestures of expression that which it is not” (94). When we read a literary text, he argues, we need to pay attention not to “that false simplicity that derives from the apparent unity of its meaning, but [to] the presence of a relation, or an opposition,” a conflict in the text that “reveals the inscription of an *otherness* in the work” (80, 85). It is this opposition or otherness that bestows structure on the work, and even though the text cannot speak of such division, it identifies it through its silences: “In its every particle, the work *manifests*, uncovers, what it cannot say. This silence gives it life” (84). Macherey is not talking about finding “the hidden meaning” of a text; on the contrary, he stresses the fact that the literary text “has no interior, no exterior; or rather, its interior is like its exterior, shattered and on display. Thus it is open to the

gaze, peeled, disemboweled” (96). In order for a work to say one thing, however, it must also say something else, and what we need to look for is the contrast between the two, the hollow that “separates and unites them” (100). It is in this sense and this sense only that Macherey refers to the unconscious of the work (as opposed to that of the author), and this is the meaning that I too have in mind when I speak of the textual unconscious.

“In the culture of psychoanalysis,” Ned Lukacher suggests, “Dickens has always been the figure of both its prehistory and its future” (336), and thus it is only appropriate that my first chapter turns its attention to Dickens and specifically to *Martin Chuzzlewit*. This early novel (1843–44) had its origin in turbulence and conflict, as Dickens attempted to come to terms with the profound disappointments he had experienced during his 1842 visit to America. But while conflict and psychic violence are, in part at least, behind the complex impulses that drive this novel, they are also responsible in some mysterious way for the fact that it is a wonderful comic novel, one rightfully included by Robert Polhemus in the great tradition of the British comic novel. Not only was Sairey Gamp William Faulkner’s favorite literary character (*Lion in the Garden*, 251), but she remains one of the most memorable characters in English literature. Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is still the best discussion of humor that we have, and in it he reminds us that jokes are almost always subversive, unashamedly politically incorrect, and often violent and sexual. In this respect, *Martin Chuzzlewit* might be read as a joke writ large, with Mrs. Gamp as both its punch line and its lead stand-up comic. But the novel looks at the sexual and the violent in other ways as well. The central scene I consider, occurring fairly late in the novel, is initiated by a fight between Tom Pinch and Jonas Chuzzlewit, but Charity Pecksniff also figures prominently in it. This particular scene embodies one of the textual ruptures or hollows that Macherey speaks of, a site of forbidden wishes or desires, including those of patricide and incest, that cannot be given voice but must instead be articulated indirectly through ambiguous and sometimes violent gestures, as well as through the awkward or aberrant behavior that surrounds them.

In the second section of this chapter, I look at the American episodes of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, arguing that Dickens finds in America’s myths and legends about itself evidence of a repressed narrative that testifies to the ways in which the desire that Ghosh speaks of, namely, the desire to find a

place without borders, works itself out in America's history. In the case of Dickens's America, such a desire leads to violence and aggression, for the body politic of America, the novel argues, is a fragmented body torn away from its origins or beginnings and desperate in its pain to reclaim that which has been lost. In the American sections of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, desire gives birth to a death wish that wears the face of a demonic child, separated from its childhood and willing to do whatever is necessary to return to it once again. The language, myths, and legends of the Americans in *Martin Chuzzlewit* are symptomatic gestures that disclose an unconscious desire that manifests itself, like hysteric symptoms, in patterns of repetition and return characterized by violence and self-deception.

I next turn my attention to Thackeray's *Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846), an account of a voyage that Thackeray, at the invitation of a friend, took in 1844 through the Middle East and what was then referred to as the Orient. Thackeray's *Journey*, I argue, is a site of unacknowledged conflicts, telling a story rather different from the one Thackeray's narrator claims to tell. It is the only narrative examined in this study that is not a novel, and thus its inclusion calls for some comment. Like Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, *Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* is a fascinating and powerful text by a major author that has received comparatively little attention. But even more importantly, Thackeray's narrative raises important questions regarding subjectivity, especially in regard to the identity of the writing subject. As indicated earlier, the existence of the unconscious implies the notion of a decentered subjectivity, the possibility that we write and speak from somewhere other than where we think we write and speak from, and as much as any text examined in this study, Thackeray's narrative invites us to explore the implications of such a possibility. It is precisely this dislocation of subjectivity that lies behind much of this text's haunting and troubling tone, for in the text we find a narrative of exile, as Thackeray's narrator wanders through a world that invites his gaze, but does not allow him to inhabit it.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), the subject of my third chapter, is a text that various readers have characterized as distressed and uneven, a novel filled with conflict and errant cross-purposes, and I too am interested in these aspects of Gaskell's novel. I am especially intrigued by what *Ruth* does not say, but what is nevertheless acted out by the elaboration of certain utter-

ances in it. Gaskell's novels frequently explore the domain of the erotic. *Ruth* too participates—brilliantly, in fact—in such an exploration, but, at the same time, it is a death-haunted novel, just as Ruth herself is an intensely passionate woman around whom an aura of death and dissolution lingers throughout the novel. Desire in *Ruth* is often death haunted or death ridden, seeking from the beginning darkened spaces and corners that anticipate the plague-infected topography of the novel's closing pages. The prostitute is not only the other of the Victorian age itself, as Sarah Webster Goodwin has suggested (“Romanticism and the Ghost of Prostitution,” 159–60), but also the other of Gaskell's text, a floating signifier embodying this strange and troubled merging of the erotic and death, and her presence in the text testifies to Elizabeth Gaskell's own rich and complex imagination.

In Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), the focus of the next chapter, we find a narrative that would seem to call our attention to the ways in which we should read it, as we hear Walter Hartright telling of “something hidden below the surface,” and Marian Halcombe speaking of “the hidden contents” of texts. But there are no hidden depths or concealed meanings in this narrative, for, like Freud's unconscious, the textual unconscious of Collins's novel is disclosed through language, making itself known, for example, through the ways in which what is said is said—namely, in the very nature of Walter's narrative itself (how he tells the story he tells) as well as in the lacunae and wounds, in part Oedipal in nature, that punctuate his narrative, creating disequilibria and textual tears or gaps in its lines of filiation and chronology. And in my final chapter, I turn to *Jude the Obscure* (1895), both the last novel Hardy wrote and, I would argue, the last novel of the Victorian age. Both Hardy and his readers have suggested a number of reasons why he wrote no more novels after *Jude the Obscure*, but it is possible that he had nowhere else to go, nothing else to say, or at least nothing else that he wanted to say as a novelist. In writing about the art of Wagner and Turner, Hardy suggested that he especially admired their later work because neither man was content to rest complacently in what he had done so well, but instead continued to push the limits of his art: “When a man not contented with the grounds of his success goes on and on, and tries to achieve the impossible,” Hardy said, “then he gets profoundly interesting to me.”²³ Like Wagner and Turner, Hardy was too good an artist to simply do again what he had done earlier, refusing to rest content “with the grounds of his

success.” Instead of going backward or standing still, he moved into poetry, letting *Jude the Obscure* stand as his last novel. And although Hardy was not happy with *Jude the Obscure*—“Alas, what a miserable accomplishment it is,” he confessed, “when I compare it with what I meant to make it”—his last novel is considerably more of an accomplishment than Hardy’s remark acknowledges.²⁴

Marjorie Garson points out in *Hardy’s Fables of Integrity* that “Jude Fawley wants” (152), but Sue Bridehead also “wants,” and in her case as well as Jude’s, “want” implies both lack and desire. But the object of desire in *Jude the Obscure* remains hidden, obscured, and Hardy invokes ancient voices of classical literature, not only in order to develop his own voice more fully, but also to explore the nature of this desire, identified in *Jude* as “yearning.” Coming at the end of Hardy’s career as a novelist as well as at the end of the century, *Jude the Obscure* is appropriately enough a fiction about ends, exploring the nature of closure itself. In looking at the question of closure and its relationship to what Hardy identifies as the condition of modernism, I have drawn on Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, one of our century’s most haunting and disturbing inquiries into these questions, for it can tell us much, I think, about the nature of the concealed desires in *Jude* and the ways in which they make their presence felt. My final chapter on *Jude the Obscure* allows my study to come full circle. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Sairey Gamp and the world of the folk and carnivalesque that she represents stand in sharp contrast to the death-haunted and violent impulses that govern much of the novel, and in Hardy’s last novel, its final words are spoken by Arabella Donn, a woman who is, like Mrs. Gamp, utterly at home in her own body, an anomaly in a world otherwise inhabited by lonely wanderers taking part in a futile search for that place without borders, experiencing a sense of absence that is, like Robinson Crusoe’s, insupportable.