Realism, Narrative History, and the Production of the Bestseller

The Da Vinci Code and the Virtual Public Sphere

Stephen J. Mexal

2011

Contents

> It is the romance of history which attracts the half educated and secures the publisher.
>
> ("The Perils of Historical Narrative")

> [B]ooks can't possibly compete with centuries of established history.
>
> (The Da Vinci Code)

Fables of History

IN MARCH 2005, CARDINAL TARCISIO BERTONE, ARCHBISHOP OF GENOA, took time from his schedule to offer a short bit of literary criticism. Speaking on Vatican Radio, Bertone offered an emphatic and pithy denunciation of a popular novel. His informal edict was blunt: "don't buy," he said, "and don't read that novel." Later, Bertone elaborated on his remarks. The novel, he claimed, "aims to discredit the church and its history through gross and absurd manipulations." The novel's chief danger lay in its massive popularity. "The book is everywhere," he said. "You can't be a modern youth without having read it."

It appears the novel warranted the Vatican's attention for two reasons: first, because of its ubiquity, and second, because of its potential to shake the edifice of the conventional historical narrative. "There is a very real risk," Bertone concluded, "that many people who read it will believe that the fables it contains are true" (qtd. in Williams C01). In short, the Catholic church felt that a novel—a cultural repository for "fables"—somehow held the possibility of convincing its readers that its narrative fictions were, in fact, nonfictional, and that those narratives could influence history itself.

Bertone was, of course, referring to The Da Vinci Code, Dan Brown's 2003 novel that effortlessly wed a paranoiac's obsession with secret societies and the Roman Catholic church to the action-movie adventures of Brown's protagonist, Harvard "symbologist" Robert Langdon. On the surface, Bertone's condemnation of Brown's novels seems peculiar, and even a little absurd. How does one confuse the novelistic for the factually true? In the popular imagination, the two are binary opposites. The entire premise of the novel is that it is not factually true.

The word "novel"—at least as used to refer to long-form narrative— has never been precisely synonymous with the direct and factual representation of historical actuality. Cardinal Bertone was taking the time to clarify what most people, presumably, already knew. Indeed, as The Da Vinci Code began to sell many millions of copies, a virtual cottage industry of books, articles, and television programs appeared, all dedicated to making the same, and ultimately very simple, point that Bertone made in 2005: This book is a novel. If something is a "novel," that means it's "not true." The fact that Bertone felt compelled to disavow the novel tells us a few things about the cultural

capital accorded to historical narratives in the twenty-first century, about the relationship between bestsellerdom and historicity, and about the way in which bright-line divisions between true and not-true, between histories and novels, are easily blurred.

Dan Brown himself sought to present The Da Vinci Code as a new cultural form. On the title page of the novel appears the standard disclaimer, "All of the characters and events in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons" or events is "purely coincidental." Not five pages later, though, appears the apparently contradictory claim—clearly announced in large, bold typeface as "FACT"—that the Priory of Sion (a secret society figuring in the novel) "is a real organization," and that all descriptions of "documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate" (1). Before the reader even begins the narrative proper, The Da Vinci Code announces itself as a strange new hybrid: not historical fiction, but fictional history. It is fiction that makes claims on, and purports to affect, the reader's status as a historical subject. And Brown took pains to underscore this fusion of fictional and historical narratives in interviews to promote the book. Appearing on the Today show in 2003, Brown was asked, "How much of this is based on reality in terms of things that actually occurred?" Brown responded, "Absolutely all of it. [. . .] Robert Langdon is fictional, but all of the art, architecture, secret rituals, secret societies, all of that is historical fact." Along similar lines, in an interview with Good Morning America, Brown was asked to imagine writing The Da Vinci Code "as a nonfiction book" rather than "a novel." "How would it have been different?" host Charlie Gibson asked. Dan Brown responded, "I don't think it would have." The significance of The Da Vinci Code, and the reason for its bestseller status, lies in this interplay between narrative history and fiction. The novel has provided a cultural site in which the nonacademic public can come together and critically debate what constitutes the "fictional," as well as how narrative fiction has shaped what we typically recognize as historical. This is a topic resonant with the global public, for as the economic borders of the nation-state have eroded in recent decades, so also has the solidity of the conventional historical narrative. The public debate created by The Da Vinci Code in the popular press and in online forums such as Amazon.com's "Customer Reviews" reveals a deep and persistent ambivalence about the relationship between fictional narrative and historical subjectivity. This debate has largely occurred in online discussion forums and usergenerated book reviews, examples of what Stanley Fish calls "interpretive communities": social matrices in which literary or historical meaning is produced (171). In these global public spaces, the public is able to debate the degree to which history and fiction are intertwined narrative discourses, all the while upholding The Da Vinci Code as the text uniting those discourses in the public imagination.

The Bestseller and the Public

The Da Vinci Code is the highest selling American novel ever. It is, literally, the bestselling bestseller. As of early 2008, it had sold over seventy million copies worldwide and been translated into more than forty languages. It has also spawned a cottage industry of related books seeking to participate in the novel's representations of myth and history, books like Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code, The Da Vinci Hoax, The Da Vinci Fraud, The Real History Behind The Da Vinci Code, and Breaking The Da Vinci Code. There are a number of explanations why the novel speaks to a global public: it is a ripping good yarn, of course, with its thrilling chase scenes, secret societies, and touristic whirl through the Louvre and other French landmarks. It also congratulates readers on their familiarity with the signifiers of high culture. (Although in practice, the only real familiarity required seems to be the knowledge that the Mona Lisa is a painting, and that France is a country in Europe.) And although the novel fuses twin narrative discourses, historical and fictional, it is important to remember that bestseller status and a novel's themes are mutually informing entities. As Laura J. Miller notes, "the best-seller list is actively participating in the doings of the book world rather than just passively recording it" (289). The Da Vinci Code is a bestseller because it has provided a site for public debate about the relationship between fictional and historical narrative, and then again, it has provided that site because it is a bestseller.

The word bestseller is a term born in the modern consumer marketplace, dating only from the late nineteenth century. To be able to publicly recognize a book that sells the best is not only to have a retail and journalistic infrastructure to perform and report on the actual selling, it is necessarily to have an implicit geographical, linguistic, and economic audience in mind. After all, a bestseller in Albuquerque may not be a bestseller in Anchorage, a bestseller in English may not be a bestseller in Arabic, and a bestseller in paperback may not have been a bestseller in hardback. So it does not make sense to speak of a bestselling book without speaking of the public, implied or otherwise, that produced that book's bestseller status. And similarly, one cannot speak of a bestselling book without speaking of the public sphere—the newspapers, magazines, and online publications—that tallies the numbers for, and debates the production of, bestsellerdom. A bestselling book, then, is a phenomenon that is indivisible from the existence of a particular public.

Of course, to have such things as bestselling books means that books are mass market commodities, not singular artifacts. We must have many books, and many copies of any individual book, in order to classify particular texts as bestsellers. This, too, is a consequence of modernity. The proliferation of factory-produced movable type and efficient distribution channels in the late nineteenth century, coupled with the explosion of advertising-supported magazines that drastically changed the public sphere in 1893, all provided the social and historical conditions amenable to the phenomenon of the bestseller. It is because of these economic and historical conditions that the first regular regional publication of bestseller lists did not occur until 1895, and national

bestseller lists did not commence regular publication until 1897. But if the emergence of bestsellerdom is coeval with the emergence of mass-produced and branded merchandise like cans of soup or bars of soap, it is worth underscoring that books were (and are still) regarded as having a different—somehow richer, more complex— relationship with the public, even if they are still bought and sold like any other mass-produced product. To know the bestselling book for any given region, ethnicity, or religious group is, it is assumed, to know something about that group. It is to possess information that cannot be conveyed by knowing, say, the top selling bar of soap. In one of the earliest uses of the phrase best seller, the April 25, 1889 issue of the Kansas Times & Star opined that "Kansas City's literary tone is improving. The six best sellers here last week were 'Fools of Nature,' [etc.]" (OED). Here, the editors assume that the vagaries of the consumer marketplace are connected, in a meaningful way, to the makeup of the Kansas City public. To know the "best sellers here last week" is to chart the existence and improvement of "Kansas City's literary tone," which in turn, it is implied, is integral to the social health of Kansas City as a social organism.

We still do this today. In 2005, sales of Adolph Hitler's Mein Kampf spiked in Turkey, suddenly selling over 100,000 copies in two months. A flurry of media attention followed, sparking news interest from the BBC and in publications like The Guardian. Each article was implicitly hermeneutic, attempting to divine the significance, the meaning, of Mein Kampf 's bestseller status in Turkey. Invariably, the logic of the articles went something like this: This bestseller teaches us something about the Turkish public. What does it teach us?

These hermeneutic assumptions suggest that the word bestseller contains a confluence of metonymic significances. First is the obvious way in which bestseller is short for bestselling book. It is of course possible to chart bestselling soap or bestselling soup, but bestselling book is one of the few socioeconomic metrics significant enough to require its own neologism. This speaks to the primary significance of bestsellerdom: the way in which the word itself is metonymic with a particular conception of the public.

But The Da Vinci Code has sold so many copies that it renders any traditional conception of its "public" virtually meaningless. The text is a global spectacle in a way that no novel has been previously. This is at least in part because the novel has positioned itself as being able to make claims upon, and indeed affect, historical actuality. But it is also because the relationship between historical narrative and fictional narrative is complicated stuff.

Stories of History

Conventionally, there is a sharp distinction between historical stories and fictional stories. By this logic, both historical and fictional events must employ the coherency of narrative in order to be accepted, but historical stories are distinguished by their

use of real, rather than imaginary, events. As Hayden White argues, though, those conventional distinctions are actually quite problematic. He writes that the fact that narrative "predominates in both mythic and fictional discourse makes it suspect as a manner of speaking about 'real' events" (57). After all, one can "produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being imaginary" (57). A recent example of this phenomenon is Edmund Morris's authorized biography of Ronald Reagan, Dutch, which was, famously, narrated by a wholly imagined contemporary of the president. The narrative discourse of Dutch is imaginary—there was no "Edmund Morris," lifelong friend of Reagan, only the historian Edmund Morris inventing that character—but the real events of Reagan's life, as well as, arguably, the insight into Reagan's personal tendency toward invention and fantasy, are nonetheless true. History and fiction, then, draw on a shared confluence of meaning. As White concludes, the "affiliation of narrative historiography with literature and myth should provide no reason for embarrassment" because the "systems of meaning production shared by all three are distillates of the historical experience of a people" (44–45). The coherency of narrative is the content of both historiography and literature. Narratives themselves are necessarily imagined, even if the events contained in those narratives are real. Conversely, (imagined) narratives about imaginary events still contain an organic connection to the (nonimagined) historical experiences of a public.

Although by the late nineteenth century, academic historiography would grow to affirm the rigidity of the binary opposition between fiction and history, under the classical model of historiography, fiction was included as an integral part of historical writing. Nancy F. Partner writes that the classical historia often incorporated small fictions into the narrative fabric of the larger nonfictional historical project. Fictional stories were seen as fulfilling crucial functions in the historical narrative. Fiction, in short, was not the opposite of history; fiction explained history:

> Fiction, as deployed by Herodotus and Thucydides, raised history from a mere descriptive record of events in sequence to a level nearer philosophy, nearer to those permanently apt generalizations about human character, politics and the causes of war so prized in Greek intellectual life. To be serious, valuable, elevated in classical culture, was to move beyond the particular. The fictions allowed history to be about something. (27)

Narrative fiction provided a context and meaning to lived historical experience. In the classical imagination, history and fiction were fused into a single discourse with the larger goal of creating a single, coherent, and "permanently apt" truth.

Even at the end of the nineteenth century, history was perceived by both academic historians and the public alike to be a singular and monolithic entity that was gradually written over time. As Allan Megill notes, "intelligent men believed that the then relatively new academic discipline was poised to produce a unified account of the history of humanity, or at least of that part of humanity whose doings were worth recording"

(189). Today, of course, mainstream academic historiography has embraced a complex multiplicity and abandoned any pretense of constructing—or rather reconstructing—a coherent master historical narrative.

But the historical model presented in The Da Vinci Code is a single, sweeping narrative—the sort of thing that can be hidden and discovered, like an artifact or secret plot. It is the stuff of conspiracy buffs and paranoiacs, not actual historians. But what is most interesting about Brown's novel is not whether it does or does not hew to the dominant academic model of historicity, but rather that it reveals a deep longing, in a global, transnational public, for a coherent master historical narrative. And in so doing it also reveals, by contrast, the senses of ache and fragmentation that result from the complexity of contemporary historical multiplicity.

Realism and The Da Vinci Code

The plot of The Da Vinci Code is literally a grail quest. Brown's holy grail, though, is not the chalice of Christ, but rather the suppressed history of Christianity. This idea—which Brown drew largely from Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln's 1982 book Holy Blood, Holy Grail—in practice means that the novel's two main "historical" revelations are these: "The Holy Grail is a woman" (Brown 242, ital. in original), and "Mary Magdalene [. . . was] marri[ed] to Jesus Christ" (Brown 244). Interestingly, the revelation of this secret history is never fully resolved in the narrative. The novel ends with an ambiguous epilogue in which Langdon kneels outside the Louvre pyramid, seeming to make the decision not to subvert the established, not-real, "official" history by revealing the "real," but hidden, history.

All claims about the historicity of Christ's marital status are necessarily speculative to some degree. As Bart D. Ehrman points out, the scholarly consensus is that Jesus was not married, arguing that "in none of our early Christian sources is there any reference to Jesus' marriage or his wife" (153). While this is surely correct, an absence of evidence for marriage is not precisely the same thing as evidence of being unmarried, and imaginative speculation, even if educated imaginative speculation, is necessary in historiography. There exist no marriage records or photographs from that time, and so while different forms of knowledge are applicable—educated guesses given the best available historical evidence, appeals to the religious authority of the Bible—all of those forms of knowledge necessarily involve a sort of speculative fiction, an act of imagination. And this act of imagination, in turn, is similar to what Brown attempts in his novel. But the cultural use value of Brown's imagining lies not in its ability to reveal historical actuality of two thousand years ago, but rather the historical actuality of right now.

Brown uses a three-tiered system of geographic and historical signifiers to create the effect of historical realism. The first word of the novel, immediately preceding the prologue, is "FACT." And it is the foundation of facts, or at least the appearance of facts,

upon which Brown builds the first tier of his realist edifice. There is nothing unusual or insidious about this; it has been common novelistic practice since the emergence of literary realism in America in the nineteenth century. Brown is careful to inject into his opening pages a surfeit of tangible objects and places, things that actually exist in the world: the Opus Dei building on "Lexington Avenue in New York City" (1); "Harvard University" (7); the "Pavillon Dauphine" in Paris (8); "Boston Magazine" (9); the "Direction Centrale Police Judiciaire" (10). The presence of these material signifiers serves as a narrative bridge for readers into the imaginative world of the novel. Those objects provide a reassurance that the fictive story world is—as Brown claims on the first page of the novel—indeed intertwined with the material reality of the nonstory, or real, world. The presence of those details creates a link between fictional and historical narratives both inside and outside the novel, providing assurance that The Da Vinci Code is, as Hayden White suggests about imaginative narratives, no "less 'true' for being imaginary" (57). By including tangible items that exist in contemporary historical reality, Brown works to confirm the essential realism of his fiction.

The second tier of Brown's realist aesthetic involves what might be called proprietary realism. This approach achieves the sheen of realism through specificity. Brown's narrator, in this narrative scheme, is privy to the same level of details for any given object as the proprietor of that object. Unlike the first tier, the information in this tier is often not easily verifiable. But because the first tier has already established the narrator's general reliability, the second tier confirms it. For example, Langdon knows that the Louvre pyramid "had been constructed of exactly 666 panes of glass" (21). Or that there are "65,300 pieces of art" in the museum (18). The fact that neither of these things is empirically true is irrelevant.[1] Their very specificity bespeaks accuracy, and so the reader, already having cognitively verified the essential realism of the fiction in the first tier—or perhaps literally verified it, by finding the Pavillon Dauphine on a map, or buying an issue of Boston magazine— further confirms for him- or herself the sense of being-in-history that is put into narrative by The Da Vinci Code.

In the third tier of Brown's system of historical and geographic signifiers, the narrative discourse shifts almost completely from realist–historicist to imaginative–conjectural. This shift, though, is near imperceptible, because it draws on the narrative authority established in the first and second tiers to imaginatively reassemble historical actuality. This is best illustrated by the revelatory climax of the book, in which protagonist Sophie Neveu is informed of the secret, hidden history of Christianity and Mary Magdalene's "marriage to Jesus Christ" (244).

> "It's a matter of historical record," Teabing said, "and Da Vinci was certainly aware of that fact. The Last Supper practically shouts at the viewer that Jesus and Magdalene were a pair." [Here Teabing identifies the figure traditionally to the left of Jesus, conventionally identified as the apostle

[1] According to the museum's own Web site, there are actually 673 panes of glass and 35,000 works of art, not 666 and 65,300 (Louvre.fr).

> John, as Mary Magdalene.] "Notice that Jesus and Magdalene are clothed as mirror images of one another." Teabing pointed to the two individuals in the center of the fresco. [. . .] "Venturing into the more bizarre," Teabing said, "note that Jesus and His bride appear to be joined at the hip and are leaning away from one another as if to create this clearly delineated negative space between them." Even before Teabing traced the contour for her, Sophie saw it—the indisputable \/ shape at the focal point of the painting. It was the same symbol Langdon had drawn earlier for the Grail, the chalice, and the female womb. (244)

Here Brown fuses fanciful hermeneutics with history. Symbols are not, for Brown and his characters, complex, multivalent things, subject to the vagaries of interpretation and the historical moment. Instead, they are singular, static entities. They mean one thing. In this tier, Brown takes things that exist in history and, through a singular and hermeneutically uncomplicated symbol, reassembles them into imaginative narrative.

Brown conjoins disparate, nonimaginative historical phenomena to create symbolic, imaginative associations unsupported by historical data. This is somewhat akin to the phenomenon of pareidolia, in which random data are perceived as possessing coherence and significance. One might, for instance, "find" an image of Richard Nixon in a tortilla. The fact that Richard Nixon is historically real and the tortilla is historically real does not necessarily mean that there is a historically real explanation for the apparent presence of Nixon in the tortilla. Or, to put it more directly: Leonardo was a historical being. The tempera "The Last Supper" was painted at some point in history. Jesus and Mary Magdalene were (probably) beings that existed in history. The materiality of these people and objects all hew to accepted norms of historical veracity—they were real. But simply because Leonardo, the tempera, and the figures in the painting all possess a historical actuality does not mean that the \/ shape made by those figures necessarily translates into a particular symbol that itself possesses a historical actuality. And that imagined symbol, in turn, does not necessarily reflect a secret historical reality that has been suppressed for hundreds of years.

Of course it doesn't. But why would anyone think it would? How does Brown's literary realism become linked to his claims to historicity in the public imagination, and, more significant, how does the public respond to that model of history? The answer to those questions in part involves the notion of coherency in historical narrative. Allan Megill writes that a century ago,

> the basis for history's coherence was held to lie in the possibility of eventually constructing a single, authoritative narrative of human history. When this hope failed, the basis for coherence was held to reside in a shared method. Among [certain historians . . .] the commitment was not to a distinctive method of history but rather to an investigative process [. . .] that would yield authoritative, although possibly provisional knowledge. What

> is striking now is the degree to which [. . . this] version of coherence has become passe´. (202)

The historiographic model of The Da Vinci Code is, in brief, the reemergence of this narratological view of historical coherence: the allure of a single and "authoritative narrative of human history." The vision of historical actuality offered by Brown is one in which all events and narratives are part of a singular and satisfying whole. Jesus, Leonardo, and "The Last Supper" are not discrete historical entities but rather integral parts of a single, coherent historical narrative.

The Authority of History and the Virtual Public Sphere

There is comfort in the coherency of a historical master narrative. And the widespread longing for this sort of comfort is revealed not only in the text of The Da Vinci Code itself, but also in online forums and bulletin boards, in public-generated texts such as Amazon.com's "Customer Reviews" that stand as examples of a virtual global public sphere.

In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, philosopher Ju¨rgen Habermas charts the emergence of this sphere in eighteenthcentury Europe, based in part on historical accounts of public conversations occurring in English coffeehouses. In Habermas's view, the bourgeois public sphere was formed when private individuals drew together and, through rational debate, formed a "consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all" (83). The press, for Habermas, was crucial to the production of public identity. Beginning with the daily political journals appearing in the middle of the seventeenth century, public information was dependent on private correspondence for its material. But by the first half of the eighteenth century, "in the guise of the so-called learned article, critical reasoning made its way into the daily press" (25). The press, he suggests, not only provides a discursive framework that structures the public, it also creates the critical reasoning skills that allow for public opinion. As a result, the popular press is foundationally connected with the emergence of the public sphere.

In its traditional role, the press acts as a mediator between the state and the public. One of the byproducts of the pervasiveness of the internet, though, is that it has diffused some of the conventional responsibilities and functions of journalism. New digital media—forms of so-called "citizen journalism" such as blogs; virtual meetinghouses like online discussion forums; or "wikis," where knowledge is produced democratically—have offered opportunities for reconceptualizing the public sphere, recapturing some of the immediacy and vitality of the eighteenth-century coffeehouse. Constituents of any given micro-public can come together directly, without the impediments of geographic

or national boundaries, to form a new, macro-level community: a global, virtual public sphere.

The public that has revealed itself though discussions of The Da Vinci Code is one that is obsessed with historical narrative. Perhaps more to the point, it is a public obsessed with the existence and the veracity of a singular narrative historical edifice. In virtual public spaces such as Amazon.com's Customer Reviews, the public is able to debate the degree to which history and fiction are intertwined narrative discourses, all the while upholding The Da Vinci Code as the text uniting those discourses in the public imagination.

As of this writing, The Da Vinci Code has garnered over 3,500 individual reviews at Amazon.com, from readers around the globe.[2] Predictably, the tenor of the reviews is wide-ranging. There are attempts to situate Brown within a contemporary, popular literary canon by comparing him—unfavorably—to Umberto Eco or Arturo Pe´rezReverte. There are also numerous attempts to correct, or at least counterbalance, the novel's ideas about Biblical historicity with claims of divine infallibility or personal revelation. (User "E. Hughes," for example, dismisses the text as "historically a joke" because "[i]n a period of 9 months Jesus Christ revealed Himself to me in a variety of ways, both natural and supernatural.") More notably, many of the reviewers cite each other, creating a sort of lay scholarship of the novel.[3] The reviews, then, serve as a site of critical public debate centered on a popular text. The fact that the novel seems to have created a virtual public sphere, inviting deliberative analysis from users around the globe, has clearly contributed to its bestseller status.

Within this virtual community of readers and lay critics, much of the discussion of the novel tends to indulge the assumption that any particular knowledge system is coherent and monolithic, and to debunk one part of the system is to destroy the entire edifice. It is the authority of the singular historical master narrative that is most often the subject of debate in this virtual public sphere. The Da Vinci Code, for these readers, is an assault on the solidity and surety of history itself, and to dismantle one mechanism of Brown's text is, within the logic of these reviews, to restore the coherency of the historical master narrative.

For many reviewers, time and space are conflated. Readers refute the novel's geography (an element from the first tier of the novel's realist aesthetic), in their attempts to refute the novel's imagined history (in the third tier of Brown's aesthetic). Anonymous user "A Customer" argues that Brown's "credibility" as an "historian" is marred

[2] Although the "Customer Reviews" section features comments from a global readership, notethis analysis is confined to the US American Amazon.com, and does not take account of the text's popularity at Amazon.com's international sites in Austria, Canada, France, Germany, China, Japan, England, and Hispanophone countries like Spain and Mexico.

[3] User "Parity" from Canada, along with at least three other users, cites an anonymous user fromEvergreen, CO as writing a particularly influential review. Similarly, "Eric W. Hulbert," from New York, cites the work of "Maria Russo," from Italy, whose critique of one of the novel's many historical fallacies observes that Brown seems to think Constantine spoke English.

by his geographic errors: "the Louvre," he notes, "is east of the Tuileries, not 'west' as Brown has it." Along similar lines, "Sam Kay" makes a telling slip in his confusion of Brown and Langdon: "[f]or all of Dan Brown's 'remarkable research and detail' I was lost at Chapter 3 when he [i.e., Langdon] 'skimmed south past the Opera House and entered the Place Vendome' on his way to the Louvre." Furthermore, Brown's imagined history is "spoiled," Kay writes, by the novel's geographic departures from historical actuality: "The last time I looked, the Hotel Ritz was in the Place Vendome and the Opera House was several blocks north in the wrong direction from the Louvre." The implied historical narrative here is one that is singular and cohesive. Otherwise, these are two separate and non-overlapping issues: Brown's "credibility" as an imaginative "historian" in matters Biblical should be distinct from his credibility as a cartographer. Yet for these readers, the production of history is a distinctly coherent enterprise, one inseparable from geographic actuality or religious truth.

This tendency appears time and again. Reader "BigJake" dismisses the novel's narrative as a "quasi-religious chase," in part because "the author [writes that] Charles and Diana [got] married at Westminster Abbey," when in fact, "[t]hey got married at St. Paul's." "Liloo," from Paris, France, rejects the novel's "theories about the Holy Grail" as "singularly lack[ing] research." For this reader, too, it seems that Brown's Grail narrative is a historical failure because of its geographic failures:

> [Y]ou cannot hope to go to Lille from Gare Saint-Lazare [as the protagonists do in Chapter 35]; you would have to leave from Gare du Nord. [. . . In addition, to] go from Tuileries to the American Embassy, you would not need to go up rue des Champs Elysees, since the embassy is exactly at the beginning of that street.

For Liloo, the novel suffers in its claims to historicity as a result of its flaws in representing geographic actuality: "If that is all the extent of his research on Paris, I refuse to believe he has done serious work on the other aspects of the book." Given all this, it is important to underscore that the tendency to conflate historical actuality with geographic actuality is fundamentally epistemological. It does not reflect a category error, but rather a particular ideology about coherency and the historical narrative.

That is to say, common to all these critiques of Brown's novel is an implicit worldview with two key tenets. The first concerns the firm distinction between "real" and "imaginary" events, and the second concerns the coherency and authority of history. This ideology holds that history is a single, coherent narrative that concerns itself solely with "real" events. Because of this, to critique or disprove any one part of this narrative is necessarily to imperil the authority of the narrative as a whole. This, in sum, is why Brown's novel is perceived as a social or political threat in so many quarters, as well as why some readers felt they could combat that threat by disproving the coherency of Brown's (imaginary) historical narrative in a global public forum.

Bestselling History

The gap between academic historiography and public perceptions of that historiography is apparently a wide one. Although academic historians long ago abandoned the pretense of discovering a single, authoritative historical master narrative, the lay public has not relinquished that romantic view of history. Because the debate over The Da Vinci Code has concerned not only literary quality and Christianity but also the production of history itself, that debate has revealed a deep and persistent alienation among vast swaths of the public. The desire for the comfort and security of a historical master narrative—and not a thousand wisps of disconnected information masquerading as small, fragmented histories—is perhaps rooted in a certain postmodern melancholy. As user "Brown" writes in his Amazon.com review of The Da Vinci Code, "[w]orld history is being blurred and revised and erased. With it goes our hopes of finding real solutions for our current problems." By "world history," the author clearly means a single, coherent historical narrative, one grandly detached from any postmodern slippage between "real" and "imaginary" events. And the subversive work of "blurr[ing]" and "revis[ing]" is implied to be the fault of Brown and his novel. But the indignation at Brown's imaginary history masks a real sadness over the loss of historical certainty. Seen in this light, The Da Vinci Code is the locus of a global public sphere, a space where persons can come together, offer narratives of historical coherency and, in so doing, mourn the loss of the authority of the historical master narrative.

Because of its bestseller status and its claims to historical truth, Dan Brown's novel has become a public document that tells us much about the status of historical narrative in the age of globalization. The usergenerated criticisms of Brown's novel reveal a longing for a historical narrative that is singular, cohesive, and uncontested. But the text itself reveals that historical cohesion as impossible. Due in part to Brown's three-tiered realist aesthetic, one cannot easily equate the fictional with "the imaginary" and the historical with "the real" in The Da Vinci Code. Indeed, to the apparent dismay of many readers, the novel reveals the fictional and the historical to be interrelated narrative discourses. Because it claims to weave a complex blanket of fictive and historical narrative threads, The Da Vinci Code reveals to a global public the degree to which history is always contested and constructed. Yet in so doing, it also encourages the reader to enter into active dialogue not only with the text but also with a broader public. By participating in this virtual public sphere and debating the nature and coherency of narratives fictional and historical, the reader ultimately imagines himor herself as an agent of a new postnational history.

Works Cited

Baigent, Michael, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. Holy Blood, Holy Grail. New York: Dell, 1982. Print.
Bock, Darrell L. Breaking The Da Vinci Code. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004. Print.
Brown, Dan. The Da Vinci Code. New York: Doubleday, 2003. Print.
Ehrman, Bart D. Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Constantine. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.
Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982. Print.
Habermas, Ju¨rgen. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. 1961. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991. Print.
"Interview with Dan Brown." Good Morning America. ABC. 3 Nov. 2003. Web. 5 April 2008.
"Interview with Dan Brown." Today. NBC. 9 June 2003. Web. 5 April 2008.
Louvre.fr. N.d. Web. 4 April 2008.
Megill, Allan. Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007. Print.
Miller, Laura J. "The Best-Seller List as Marketing Tool and Historical Fiction." Book History 3 (2000): 286–304. Print.
Morris, Edmund. Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan. New York: Random, 1999. Print.
Newman, Sharan. The Real History Behind The Da Vinci Code. New York: Berkley, 2005. Print.
Olson, Carl E., and Sandra Miesel. The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in The Da Vinci Code. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004. Print.
Partner, Nancy F. "Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions." A New Philosophy of History. Eds. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. 21–39. Print.
Price, Robert M. The Da Vinci Fraud: Why the Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005. Print.
White, Hayden. The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. Print.
Williams, Daniel. "Top Italian Cardinal Is Out to Break 'Code."' Washington Post 17 Mar. 2005: C01. Print.
Winsor, Justin. "The Perils of Historical Narrative." Atlantic Monthly 66.395 (1890): 289–97. Print.
Stephen J. Mexal is an assistant professor of English at California State University, Fullerton. He has published in journals such as English Language Notes, MELUS, Studies in the Novel, and The Chronicle Review. His book manuscript, Reading for Liberalism, is under contract with the University of Nebraska Press.

Stephen J. Mexal
Realism, Narrative History, and the Production of the Bestseller
The Da Vinci Code and the Virtual Public Sphere
2011

The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 44, No. 5, 2011, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
<doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00889.x>