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## Recovering Hadrian

„L’authenticité est une chose, la véracité en est une autre.“  
Marguerite Yourcenar<sup>1</sup>

### I

Hadrian was emperor of Rome from 117 to 138. He is the subject of this essay. My project is to examine a number of modern works that concern themselves with Hadrian’s history and personality. It is in essence a study of how a historical figure might, or might not, be recovered. Hadrian is in some respects a very familiar figure, the builder of the Wall in Britain and what is now the Castel Sant’Angelo in Rome, the first emperor to wear a beard, the ruler who spent much of his reign travelling across his vast empire, the military disciplinarian, the devotee of Greek culture, the lover of the Bithynian boy Antinous, the poet who mused about his soul on his death-bed. At first sight, it seems as if recovering his history should be reasonably straightforward: the major events of his life and the general shape and tenor of his reign are accessible.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. Yourcenar, *Sous bénéfice d’inventaire*, Paris 1962, 9.

<sup>2</sup> On the familiar Hadrian I make no attempt to provide a complete bibliography, but mention the following standard items as essential for understanding his life and reign: P. J. Alexander, *Letters and speeches of the emperor Hadrian*, HSPH 40, 1938, 141–177; S. Aurigemma, *Villa Adriana*, Rome 1961; H. W. Benario, *A Commentary on the Vita Hadriani in the Historia Augusta*, Ann Arbor 1980; M. T. Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome*, Princeton 1987; ead., *Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire*, Princeton 2000; B. d’Orgeval, *L’Empereur Hadrien: Oeuvre législative et administrative*, Paris 1950; K. Fittschen/P. Zanker, *Katalog der römischen Porträts in den Capitolinischen Museen und den anderen kommunalen Sammlungen der Stadt Rom. Band I: Kaiser- und Prinzenbildnisse*, Mainz 1985; G. Gualandi, *Legislazione imperiale e giurisprudenza*, Milan 1963; W. L. MacDonald/J. A. Pinto, *Hadrian’s Villa and Its Legacy*, New Haven 1995; H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum Volume III: Nerva to Hadrian*, London 1936; H. Meyer, *Antinoos: Die archäologischen Denkmäler unter Einbeziehung des numismatischen und epigraphischen Materials sowie der literarischen Nachrichten. Ein Beitrag zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte der hadrianisch-frühantoninischen Zeit*, Munich 1994; J. H. Oliver, *Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri*, Philadelphia 1989; F. Pringsheim, *The legal policy and reforms of Hadrian*, JRS 24, 1934, 141–153; E. M. Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian*, Cambridge 1966; J. M. C. Toynbee, *The Hadrianic School: A Chapter in the History of Greek Art*, Cambridge 1934. Among recent items, see especially on the Latin life of Hadrian, J. Fündling, *Kommentar zur Vita Hadriani der Historia Augusta*, Bonn 2006; on Hadrian’s speeches to troops in Africa, Y. Le Bohec (ed.), *Les Discours d’Hadrien à l’armée d’Afrique*, Paris 2003, and on Antinous, C. Vout, *Power and Eroticism in Imperial Rome*, Cambridge 2007, ch. 2; cf. also ead., *What’s in a beard? Rethinking Hadrian’s Hellenism*, in: S. Goldhill/R. Osborne (eds.), *Rethinking Revolutions through Ancient Greece*, Cambridge 2006, 96–123; P. Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, Berkeley 1995, ch. V remains fundamental. On building activity, see P. J. E. Davies, *Death and the Emperor: Roman Imperial Funerary Monuments from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius*, Cambridge 2000/Austin 2004; T. E. Fraser, *Hadrian as Builder and Benefactor in the Western Provinces*, Oxford 2006; on recent scholarship, A. Galimberti, *Adriano e l’ideologia del principato*, Rome 2007; and for new documents, J. M. Reynolds, *New letters*

On examination, however, almost everything that appears to be known about Hadrian is a matter of controversy, even a detail such as his place of birth (Rome or Italica, in Spain?) This is due to the difficulties presented by the sources of knowledge that remain from antiquity. There are only two substantial narrative accounts of Hadrian's life, and both are relatively late and inadequate. One, a biography in Latin, belongs to a series of imperial biographies of varying quality collectively known as the *Historia Augusta*, a work that was composed some two hundred and fifty years after Hadrian's death; the other, in Greek, is a mere summary, made in the Byzantine era, of a portion of Cassius Dio's „History of Rome“ from the early third century. If there were more substantial accounts written closer to Hadrian's lifetime, they have not survived. Much, it is true, can be learned from other records. Documents in the form of inscriptions and papyri attest certain events and provide a vast amount of evidence on the governing personnel of empire; coins express political themes and an ideology of empire; works of art portray Hadrian and those close to him; and archaeology exposes buildings and fortifications with which Hadrian was associated. Yet to combine this material with the narratives and to construct a coherent and comprehensive history is a difficult enterprise. The problem is one familiar in ancient history: there is simultaneously too much and too little evidence; and controversy is the consequence.<sup>3</sup>

The works that I propose to examine are all distinguished items. They belong to a period of not quite sixty years that begins in 1951 with the publication of a work of fiction, Marguerite Yourcenar's „Mémoires d'Hadrien“, and ends in 2008 with Thorsten Oppen's book „Hadrian: Empire and Conflict“, which was written to accompany the spectacular exhibition of the same name held at the British Museum from July 24 to October 26, 2008. They include Royston Lambert's „Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous“ (1984), a work by a writer who, like Yourcenar, was not a specialist in ancient history; the standard historical biography of Hadrian from 1997, Anthony Birley's „Hadrian: The Restless Emperor“; Elizabeth Speller's „Following Hadrian: A Second-Century Journey through the Roman Empire“, published in 2003, an historical account of Hadrian's life far from traditional; and a sequence of particularised contributions by Ronald Syme, both in his „Tacitus“ of 1958 and in many articles that are now available in his collected papers. The studies are very different in type and form, and to my mind compel reflection on what it is to recover historical experience. What follows therefore is intended as a disquisition on how in various ways all the works concerned are equally successful and equally problematic, successful because they allow certain aspects of the historical subject to be perceived, problematic because they are all subjective inventions. This may seem a strange proposition, because it implies that the work of a novelist, drawing on the free flow of the imagination, may have as much authority as the

of Hadrian to Aphrodisias: trials, taxes, gladiators and an aqueduct, *JRA* 13, 2000, 5–20; C. P. Jones, A letter of Hadrian to Naryka (Eastern Locris), *JRA* 19, 2006, 151–162.

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<sup>3</sup> On the *Historia Augusta* (HA), see below with n. 5. On Dio's largely anecdotal but independently constructed account of Hadrian, see F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio*, Oxford 1964, 60–72; cf. R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography*, Oxford 1971, 125.

work of the historian, constrained as it must be by the limits of evidence and the responsibility of authenticating whatever is stated. My question, however, is whether historical knowledge can be confined within these conventional bounds. I am not altogether sure what the answer will be, if indeed there will be an answer at all; but I hope at a minimum to point to some of the „special virtues“ and „special limitations“ of the items discussed.<sup>4</sup>

## II

First Syme, because the terms of reference of the issue at hand are largely set in his writings. Syme did not write a book on Hadrian – he disdained biography – but a long-standing interest is evident in the enormous body of his work as a whole, often in connection with his researches into the *Historia Augusta*, the biographical series that opens with the Latin life of Hadrian. This he believed to be, as now do most, the increasingly unreliable work of a rogue scholar writing in the late fourth century, not the set of authoritative lives composed by six authors in the age of Diocletian and Constantine it purports to be. By general agreement Syme is the greatest historian of Rome of the modern era. Consequently no student of Hadrian can safely ignore him.<sup>5</sup>

Syme's interest throughout is predominantly in public matters; that is, in imperial politics and governance and especially in the individuals who constituted Rome's governing class. In „Tacitus“, he proposed that Tacitus' „Annals“, the principal extant history of the Julio-Claudian emperors of the first century, contains covert and hostile allusions to political events from the early years of Hadrian's reign, including the terrible murder, shortly after Hadrian's accession, of four consular senators considered enemies of the new regime. He suggested also that the model for Tacitus' notorious portrait of the tyrannical emperor Tiberius, damning and subversive, was not the last Flavian emperor Domitian, as usually thought, but Hadrian, who is conceptualised as a new despot. These ideas depended on theories about the composition of the „Annals“ that have not convinced everyone – Syme maintained that Tacitus' work was mostly composed under Hadrian – but the impact Hadrian is thought to have had on Tacitus and his creation of an image of the Principate as a sinister and cabalistic form of government are, as topics,

<sup>4</sup> The interest in Hadrian in Syme's Tacitus, Oxford 1958, is evident in chapters XX, XXVI, XXVII. The relevant studies in his Roman Papers (= RP) are cited by volume and page number: R. Syme, Roman Papers I–II, ed. E. Badian, Oxford 1979; Roman Papers III, ed. A. R. Birley, Oxford 1984, Roman Papers IV–V, ed. A. R. Birley, Oxford 1988, Roman Papers VI–VII, ed. A. R. Birley, Oxford 1991. Other references are made to his *Historia Augusta* Papers (= HAP), Oxford 1983. The remaining principal works discussed are A. R. Birley, Hadrian: The Restless Emperor, London 1997; M. Yourcenar, Mémoires d'Hadrien, Paris 1951, cited from the Gallimard edition of 1974; R. Lambert, Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous, London 1988; E. Speller, Following Hadrian: A Second-Century Journey through the Roman Empire, Oxford 2003; and T. Opper, Hadrian: Empire and Conflict, London 2008. The terms of reference quoted are from W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays, New York 1989, 54, 211. A comprehensive study of Hadrianic historiography might well begin with an extract from chapter three in the first volume of Gibbon's „Decline and Fall“ (1776) that contains the provocative summation: „But the ruling passions of his soul were curiosity and vanity. As they prevailed, and as they were attracted by different objects, Hadrian was, by turns, an excellent prince, a ridiculous sophists, and a jealous tyrant.“

<sup>5</sup> The main items by Syme on the HA are „Ammianus and the *Historia Augusta*“ (Oxford 1968), id. (n. 3), and his vindication, „The *Historia Augusta*: A Call of Clarity“ (Bonn 1971), a devastating assault on his detractors, especially A. Momigliano. For the date of the HA, see for example Syme, Ammianus (op. cit.) vi: „about the year 395.“ On Syme's career and intellectual achievement, see G. W. Bowersock, Ronald Syme 1903–1989, PBA 84, 1994, 539–563.

self-evidently items of public history. The independent papers deal with comparable topics: the dates and itineraries of Hadrian's journeys, his relationships with individual cities, the personnel of government (identities, origins, careers), the recruitment of new members into the Roman senate (Spaniards and Africans for example). Often intricate and technical, marked by rigour and precision in matters of chronology and geography, they typify the historical methodology with which Syme is most associated: „the indispensable science and art of prosopography.“ Equally characteristic is the seasoning of aphorisms on human nature and society that betray an ironic, if not pessimistic, disposition very much like that of Tacitus himself, many of whose opinions Syme shared.<sup>6</sup>

There is also much in the way of hypothesis, a common word in Syme's vocabulary. His paper „Hadrian and Antioch“ provides an apposite illustration. Its subject is a passage in the Augustan life (HA Hadr. 14.1) which states that Hadrian hated the people of Antioch and wanted to divide the province of Syria, to which Antioch belonged, as a way to humiliate them. It claims that the passage is textually unreliable, derives from the now lost imperial Latin biographies of Marius Maximus, a contemporary of Cassius Dio, and is influenced by a division of Syria made by the later emperor Septimius Severus in 194. Towards the end of the paper, however, hypothesis is allowed to slide into fact as the reader meets the authoritative phrase, „As has been shown“, except that what has been shown – attribution of an idea to a lost author – is really no more than a speculative guess incapable of proof. The technique is common, and surmise, another favourite word, is often openly acknowledged. So, in connection with Hadrian's predecessor as emperor and the death of his father: „It can be supposed that Trajan was at Rome when Hadrian's father died. And let 85 be assumed the year.“<sup>7</sup>

What Syme did not write about underscores where his interests lay. Hadrian had interests in architecture and was a sponsor of new buildings throughout the Roman empire. But this was not a subject that Syme explored, and his reader can know nothing therefore of whatever might be learned, for example, from the great double temple of Venus and Rome he built in Rome, from the construction of his enormous villa at Tivoli, or from the completion of the huge temple of Olympian Zeus at Athens. Likewise Antinous, Hadrian's lover who died mysteriously in Egypt in the year 130 and who was immediately, and miraculously, made into a god, is hardly ever mentioned, and when he is, it is in language oblique and euphemistic. Syme speaks of Hadrian's „infatuation“ for the boy, and alludes to the relationship with him under the blanket terms „proclivities“ and „habits“. But he evidently found the subject distasteful, and its histor-

<sup>6</sup> Syme's „Tacitus“ was immediately recognised as extraordinary; see above all the review and discussion by A. N. Sherwin-White, Rev. of Syme, Tacitus, JRS 49, 1959, 140–146. The independent papers include „Hadrian and Italica“ (RP [n. 4] II 617–628); „Les Proconsuls d'Afrique sous Hadrien“ (RP [n. 4] II 629–637); „Ummidius Quadratus, *capax imperii*“ (RP [n. 4] III 1158–1178); „Guard Prefects of Trajan and Hadrian“ (RP [n. 4] III 1276–1302); „Hadrianic Proconsuls of Africa“ (RP [n. 4] III 1303–1315); „The Travels of Suetonius Tranquillus“ (RP [n. 4] III 1337–1349); „Hadrian and the Vassal Princes“ (RP [n. 4] III 1436–1446); „Hadrianic Governors of Syria“ (RP [n. 4] IV 50–56); „Hadrian and the Senate“ (RP [n. 4] IV 295–324); „Hadrian as Philhellene. Neglected Aspects“ (RP [n. 4] V 546–562); „Fictional History Old and New: Hadrian“ (RP [n. 4] VI 157–181); „Journeys of Hadrian“ (RP [n. 4] VI 346–357); „Hadrian's Autobiography: Servianus and Sura“ (RP [n. 4] VI 398–408); „Hadrian the Intellectual“ (RP [n. 4] VI 103–114); „Hadrian and Antioch“ (HAP [n. 4] 180–188. Quotation: RP [n. 4] V 552).

<sup>7</sup> Fact: cf. RP (n. 4) VI 351: „The source of this patent accretion on the itinerary can be divined, namely Marius Maximus, and it reflects what had been done in his own time by Septimius Severus.“ Quotations: HAP [n. 4] 186; RP [n. 4] II 618.

ical significance, impinging on religious history with the remarkable establishment of a cult of Antinous, was not considered. On Hadrian and religion generally there is indeed little at all.<sup>8</sup>

Syme was, however, keenly interested in the personality of Hadrian, a sign perhaps of how biography attracted him even as he publicly pilloried it, and despite the grand pronouncement: „And in the end human personality is a mystery.“ A paper from 1965, „Hadrian the Intellectual“, is a classic assessment. This is how it begins:

„Some find the personality of Hadrian enigmatic. It was already so to the ancients. A mass of contradictory features stands on report. Hadrian was ‚varius, multiplex, multiformis‘. On better thoughts the phenomenon is reassuring rather than perplexing. Fragmentary and defective though the evidence may be, we confront a real person, not a hero or a villain, not a conventional artefact or a political projection. In short, something like a character in a modern novel.“ (RP VI 103)

A footnote after the Latin quotation refers the reader to a passage from the fourth-century compilation called the *Epitome de Caesaribus* (14.6), a far from straightforward source, and compares a sentence from the *Historia Augusta* (HA Hadr. 14.11). What I find notable is how the statement is constructed. The passage is characteristically rhetorical in style and mesmerising in effect. It opens with four abrupt sentences that introduce a problem: because the sources are few, unreliable, and non-contemporary, Hadrian's personality is elusive and previous historians have been defeated in their attempts to pin it down. What is to be done, when all that seems recoverable is the enigma? The tone is lofty, with a hint of the dismissive in the anonymous „some“ (the scholars concerned are not worth identifying), and the overall effect, appropriate for a problem, is discomfiting. The second sentence is short but grandiloquent with its „so“ and „ancients“ – it simply means „as in antiquity“; „stands on report“ in the third sentence is similarly inflated: it means „is attested.“ A glance at the texts cited shows that the forceful word „mass“ is an exaggeration, though the reader is beguiled into belief by the carefully attenuated „may be“ – not „is“ – and the all-embracing „we“. Why truth emerges from „better thoughts“ and what those better thoughts are, the reader never learns. Then, in a new group of much smoother sentences, the Olympian solution is given: the contradictory aspects of Hadrian's personality evince „a real person“; this is the superior view, revealed as if for the first time and from a height. It does not matter that the sources

<sup>8</sup> References to Antinous in the indices of Syme's books provide nothing of substance. Oblique: „While certain features in Hadrian's conduct may disturb or repel, such as his infatuation with Antinous [...]“ (RP [n. 4] IV 46; cf. HAP [n. 4] 187). Proclivities and habits: RP (n. 4) V 551, Tacitus (n. 4) 249. Syme chose the word „conceded“ (RP [n. 4] VI 174) to allow with Marguerite Yourcenar that the time with Antinous constituted „le grand moment de la vie d'Hadrien“ (M. Yourcenar, *Les Yeux ouverts*, Paris 1980, 164). Why concession was necessary he did not say. Despite „Fiction and Archaeology in the Fourth Century“ (RP [n. 4] II 642–649), nothing suggests that the portraiture of Antinous could be historically important. Religion: Syme evidently planned a lecture called „The Religion of Hadrian“ and may have written it, but if so it no longer exists; see A. R. Birley's Introduction to R. Syme, *The Provincial at Rome*, Exeter 1999, xix n. 29. The term was „vague“ (R. Syme, *Some Arval Brethren*, Oxford 1980, v; cf. RP [n. 4] VI 177; VII 538). Some of these topics were addressed by B. W. Henderson, *The Life and Principate of the Emperor Hadrian*, London 1923, for long the principal biography of Hadrian in English, which Syme had occasion to criticise; it deserves historiographical consideration elsewhere, as also S. Perowne, *Hadrian*, New York 1960, and A. Everitt, *Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome*, London 2009.

are poor. The contradictions they indicate must be accepted because every personality is complex and contradictory unless reduced to caricature. Stating what Hadrian was not presses the point home, and the clinching argument comes from an appeal to something familiar to everyone: Hadrian is like a character in a novel, the predominant literary form of the modern age. The longer sentences, rhythmical and balanced, comforting and seductive, guarantee that the „real person“ can be understood. The result is that revelation is artfully contrived through deployment of a grand literary style of the sort encapsulated in a phrase Syme himself used to describe the diction of his Roman predecessor: „poetic, archaic, and elevated.“<sup>9</sup>

The paper develops its opening statement by introducing a stereotype of the modern „intellectual“ that ostensibly serves as a guide to the real Hadrian.

„He is curious and conceited, instable and petulant; against birth and class, authority and tradition. He dabbles in the arts, he admires the beauties of nature. A cosmopolitan by his tastes, he is devoted to foreign travel; he detests nationalism, militarism, and the cult of power; and he will defend ‚les droits de l’homme‘ or the cause of universal peace.“ (RP VI 103)

This is again expressed in beautifully modulated language that has a power all its own. A moment’s pause, however, suggests that on various counts the stereotype, if taken literally, is hopelessly anachronistic, even for 1965, because at a minimum nationalism and human rights are concepts alien to classical antiquity. The image is clearly drawn from a fusty British world of a certain time and place, and doubts about its applicability are not dispelled by the carefully inserted escape clause that accompanies it: Hadrian „might be defined as an ‚intellectual‘.“ It is not style alone therefore that controls the conception of personality but also presumption. Hadrian the intellectual is a fiction, with consequences perhaps for acts of policy.<sup>10</sup>

All history is fictive, a construct of the historian’s imagination. There is a certain similarity therefore between history and fictional writing, as Syme implied in his remark that Hadrian resembles a character from a modern novel and unambiguously affirmed elsewhere in speaking of historians in general: „They too are fabricators and creators of illusion.“ The similarity, however, is only partial. Historians are necessarily limited in their imaginative flow by the records with which they work and from which they fashion their narratives. They cannot for instance invent characters who never existed. Novelists in contrast rely on invention, and are free to create character and contingency as they wish. But what happens when a novelist writes a story about a historical figure. Is the result history or fiction? Syme’s view was that a novel is primarily a form of entertainment, which I take to mean a less intellectually rigorous form of literature than history, although he acknowledged that in some cases – Proust was an example – novels might lead to history. He was adamant, however, that Marguerite Yourcenar’s „Mémoires d’Hadrien“ was a failure as a work of history. Yourcenar maintained that she had based her book on primary sources and works of historical scholarship, and she included in its final

<sup>9</sup> „Hadrian the Intellectual“ was originally written for a conference and is just seven pages in print. Pilloried: for instance: „biographies of emperors are a menace and an impediment to the understanding of history in its structure and processes“ (R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy*, Oxford 1986, 14). Quotations: RP (n. 4) I 57; Tacitus (n. 4) 342.

<sup>10</sup> Quotation: Syme, RP (n. 4) VI 103, my emphasis.

pages a long list of the materials she had read in composing it. Some details, she admitted, were made up, but not many, and she believed that in essence her book was characterised by „la fidélité aux faits.“ Syme demurred. The book was fraudulent. In so saying he relied on a fuzzy distinction between historical fiction, a type of writing which might incorporate imaginary characters in an authentic historical setting, and fictional history, a category which has no claim to authenticity and is defined by its author's intent to deceive. It was the latter, he alleged, that Yourcenar had written.<sup>11</sup>

The assault was principally made in a lecture given in Oxford in 1984 entitled „Fictional History: Old and New: Hadrian“, which is now most easily accessible in the sixth volume of Syme's „Roman Papers“. Yourcenar's literary artistry is acknowledged. But Syme condemns her book by associating it with his intense preoccupation of the moment, the *Historia Augusta*, maintaining that both items were compositions that appear to be historically truthful but set out in fact to confound their readers through devices such as bogus names and false documents. If fraudulence was demonstrable in the *Historia Augusta* through analysis of its sources and scrutiny of the persons it named and documents it quoted, deception was evident in Yourcenar's „Mémoires“ in her inventions, inaccuracies and errors, which Syme duly listed. He was particularly vexed that she had taken the Latin biography of Hadrian at face value, and had failed to recognise the *Historia Augusta* for the hoax it was – a „masterpiece“ he called it at least once, but a hoax nonetheless. Moreover, it was not that his views about the authorship and untrustworthiness of the work were new: the German historian Hermann Dessau had first proposed the thesis of single authorship as long ago as 1889, and Syme's views were no more than refinements of Dessau's inspirational insight. Stressing accordingly that what mattered for history was the separation of fact from fiction, Syme launched a direct attack on the novelist and a book that had attained the status of a classic in the more than thirty years since its initial publication. His words were and remain unambiguous: Yourcenar „wrote in total unawareness of problems inherent in the *Vita Hadriani*.“<sup>12</sup>

Syme's critique may well have been unfair. It was certainly bizarre. It did not seem to matter to him that the notion of a rogue scholar in Theodosian Rome masquerading under six false identities was an utter figment, something made up, as in a novel; or that an anonymous and lost authority on whom he believed the author of the *Historia Augusta* to have principally drawn for information when writing the early lives in the collection was a pure invention, a writer he named „Ignotus the good biographer“; or that his characterisation of the non-existent imperial biographies of Marius Maximus as a „„chronique scandaleuse“ of the Antonine dynasty“ was simply an inference. His numerous studies of the *Historia Augusta* were indeed full of imaginative inventions, as this passage from a non-technical paper originally written for the London Review of Books

<sup>11</sup> Syme quotation: RP (n. 4) VI 164. Yourcenar (n. 4) 335. On Yourcenar's use of ancient sources, see comprehensively R. Poignault, *L'Antiquité dans l'oeuvre de Marguerite Yourcenar*, Brussels 1995. On Syme and fictional history, see M. T. Griffin, „Lifting the mask: Syme on fictional history, in: R. S. O. Tomlin (ed.), *History and Fiction: Six Essays celebrating the Centenary of Sir Ronald Syme (1903–89)*, London 2005, 16–39.

<sup>12</sup> Quotations: RP (n. 4) VI 452 (surely an overstatement); RP (n. 4) VI 163. The force of Syme's criticism is all the greater when such characterisations of the *Historia Augusta* as the following are read: „Purporting to be a selection from the imperial biographies which six persons composed in the epoch of Diocletian and Constantine, the whole compilation is permeated with fraudulence. Its main professions (date, dedications, and authorship) deserve no credence“ (Ammianus [n. 5] 1).

in 1980 amply illustrates. It summarises views set out in a host of other places. The topic is religious discord:

„It is not wholly fanciful to discover in the HA an unobtrusive plea for toleration; and admonition can be conveyed under the cover of frivolity. None the less, it is a misconception to assume a serious purpose. The HA is a genuine hoax. As in the beginning Dessau declared, ‚eine Mystifikation liegt vor.‘ The text discloses a rogue scholar, delighting in deceit and making a mock of historians. Perhaps a professor on the loose, a librarian seeking recreation, a civil servant repelled by pedestrian routine.“ (HAP 221)

This in fact is fancy in the extreme, with no thought for explaining what a „rogue scholar“ in the late fourth century was or what his purpose in perpetrating a hoax could have been, or why professors, librarians and civil servants – words like „intellectual“ that have much of the time-bound about them – should be natural candidates for writing historical hoaxes. As often, a statement grounded in conviction depends for its effect on the forcefulness of style and the power of rhetoric. Which only sharpens and brings into high relief the issue of how the past, and specifically how Hadrian’s past, might be recovered.<sup>13</sup>

### III

The current standard historical account of Hadrian is the biography by Anthony Birley, a prolific ancient historian who in „Hadrian: The Restless Emperor“ and companion biographies of Marcus Aurelius and Septimius Severus has done more than anyone to establish a modern narrative of the Antonine age. At almost four hundred pages the book is the essential starting-point for all contemporary research on its subject, a major achievement by anyone’s reckoning. It is also a book heavily indebted to Syme, which is not surprising given that Syme was Birley’s post-graduate supervisor at Oxford and a personal friend of his father, Eric Birley, a distinguished Roman historian and archaeologist in his own right who shared with Syme a strong interest in the composition of the Roman ruling class. As a historical biography, however, the book to some degree signals a break with Syme, whose views of biography were so negative, and on technical matters there is indeed radical disagreement: for Birley believes that the prime source on which the author of the Latin biography drew for information was not the reliable work of Ignotus, who now becomes redundant, but the imperial lives of Marius Maximus, which Birley considers to be full of credible factual information rather than of scandalous anecdotes. Nonetheless the book owes much to Syme in method because it is above all a prosopography of the age of Hadrian. It is unsurprising therefore to find that it exhibits a comparable antipathy towards Yourcenar’s „Mémoires“. Like Syme, Birley acknowledges the literary qualities of „Mémoires“, but he distinguishes Yourcenar’s fiction from his own „non-fictional“ account, and justifies his biography in part by the claim that Yourcenar’s

<sup>13</sup> Unfair: Griffin (n. 11) 37 n. 70; K. R. Bradley, Hadrian, Yourcenar, Syme, *Mouseion* 8, 2008, 39–53, from which some material is adapted here. Ignotus: see especially Syme (n. 3) 30–53. Quotations: HAP (n. 4) 178; 221, on which cf. 62: „He is a rogue scholar, capricious and perverse, exploiting techniques of erudition for parody and mockery, and delighting in deception, even if silly or pointless“. Fact: e.g. HAP (n. 4) 81: Marius Maximus „reproduced and enhanced the malicious gossip current in high society.“

portrait of Hadrian is simply wrong: „the Hadrian whose ‚Mémoires‘ Yourcenar composed is a different person from the historical emperor“, a telling remark that not only rejects the novelist’s imagined character but also assumes, again with Syme, that there is a Hadrian who can be objectively revealed: „the real man“, as Birley puts it. It is a book, therefore, that complicates further the issue of how a history of Hadrian, even a biographical history can be recovered, and necessarily keeps alive the problem of how to authorise historical experience.<sup>14</sup>

For Birley Hadrian is the sum of what Hadrian did. Personal characteristics are brought forward as the tradition reports them – Hadrian’s insatiable curiosity, his passions for hunting and architecture, his desire to excel in all areas of knowledge, his sense of history – but Birley finds Hadrian’s personality baffling and concentrates instead on the „facts“: what Hadrian did, where he went and with whom, and who held office under him. With an enviable command of evidence, chronology, and geography, he reconstructs the emperor’s journeys in scrupulous detail, and introduces and situates every office-holder of the period who can be identified. Conclusions on policy and governance duly follow: administrative adjustments made to Roman military and civilian life were fewer than usually thought, and Hadrian’s commitment to Hellenism was mistakenly excessive, in one case leading to the terrible result of a bloody war against the Jews. At the same time, however, Hadrian set the borders of empire at practicable limits, like Rome’s first emperor Augustus before him; his tours of the empire formed part of a programme to raise the provinces to the level of the Italian heartland; and consolidation and safeguarding of empire were guiding principles of his rule.<sup>15</sup>

The insistence on facts is relentless. Often, however, it emerges that the facts are more apparent than real, for Birley frequently tells his reader that his versions of events are guesswork and offers disclaimers as he puts them forward. He assumes all along nevertheless that it is the positivist record of hard facts that alone should be the historian’s business. Here is one illustration of his technique, from a section of the book that concerns Hadrian in North Africa in 123. It is the mode of expression that is important:

„The identity of the proconsul, who would have received Hadrian at Carthage, is not known. It might well have been Atilius Bradua, who had been consul the same year as Hadrian, and had been governor of Britain under Trajan. Bradua seems to have accompanied Hadrian on his travels, to judge from his career inscription. It might be that he first joined the imperial party at this stage. But he could have been with Hadrian for the past two years, and have stayed at Carthage to take up his proconsulship.“ (152)

<sup>14</sup> Companion biographies: A. R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, revised edition, New Haven 1987; id., *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor*, revised edition, New Haven 1988. Marius Maximus: id., *Marcus Aurelius* (op. cit.) 229–230; id., *Septimius Severus* (op. cit.) 205; contrast Syme, *HAP* (n. 4) 179. Quotations: Birley, *Hadrian* (n. 4) xiii, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Baffling: as also *Septimius Severus*: „The African emperor who died in Britain has to remain an enigma“ (Birley, *Septimius Severus* [n. 14] 200). On the connection between personality and deeds, note Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford 1939, 113: „The personality of Octavianus will best be left to emerge from his actions“, and cf. Yourcenar (n. 1) 62: „A la longue, mes actes me formaient.“ Quotation: Birley, *Hadrian* (n. 4) xiv.

The passage is typical in its mastery of technical detail: the career of the senator Atilius Bradua and the record of the provincial governors of Africa are firmly under control. But it is also typically speculative and provides in the end no new knowledge. Observe the language: the first sentence states a negative, the second a possibility („might well have been“), the third gives another possibility („seems“), the fourth an alternative („might be“), and the fifth yet another likelihood („could have been“). Nothing factual about Hadrian is actually recorded, and similar passages can be identified on almost every page, advanced on the grounds of rational or plausible conjecture, legitimate speculation, supposition, inference, or probability. The hard factual record, it becomes clear, is really very soft.<sup>16</sup>

It may readily be conceded that historians, and perhaps especially ancient historians, must rely on informed speculation and, if sensible, must suitably hedge their conclusions. What I find intriguing, however, is where the line is drawn between historical speculation and historical fiction. Sometimes it can be blurry, as in a second example from Birley. When Hadrian was in Britain building the Wall in 122 – and in this case the Wall was indeed the emperor’s „brainchild“ – Birley presumes that the emperor will have wanted to see the full extent of its line and even to survey points to its north: Hadrian was after all a „restless and inquisitive traveller.“ Accordingly the site of Trimontium (Newstead) is brought forward as a place worth personal inspection, and an attractive prospect is conjured up: „It is easy to envisage the energetic Emperor climbing the triple peak of the Eildon Hills to survey the Tweed valley.“ But this is nothing more than a prospect – there is no hard evidence to support it – and one explicable, I think, largely in personal terms: Birley grew up on the Wall in a house built with stones from the nearby Roman fort of Vindolanda, Roman Britain is in his blood, and places he knows intimately have become places that Hadrian, a kindred spirit, must also have seen. The notion that Hadrian was responsible in some way for the Wall and perhaps even designed it himself is of course inherently compelling – it is a notion that historians want to be true – and a circumstantial case can be made for it that combines what is known of Hadrian’s interests in military discipline and architecture with the unusual features of the Wall as a delimiting structure. But the case is circumstantial only and cannot be proved. It is not even certain that Hadrian went to the region of Britain where the Wall was eventually built, and one key element, the length of time he spent in Britain, is simply unknown. Obviously he never saw the completed structure. What has happened therefore is that a possibility has been created that seems factually realistic, but that differs little from a novelist’s imaginings – those for instance of Yourcenar when she describes Hadrian climbing Mt. Casius in Syria at night to offer a daybreak sacrifice.<sup>17</sup>

Other suggestions are comparable, the idea for instance that Hadrian in his maturity retained childhood memories of the victory won in 83 in Britain at the battle of Mons Graupius by the Roman general Cn. Julius Agricola – Hadrian was seven years old at the time – which is attributable, I think, to a fixation with Tacitus, the general’s father-in-law and biographer, characteristic of British classical education a generation ago, but which has no historical basis at all. It may be true, but it is the stuff in the end of a

<sup>16</sup> Guesswork: e. g. Birley, *Hadrian* (n. 4) 23.

<sup>17</sup> Quotations: Birley, *Hadrian* (n. 4) 134, 138. *Vindolanda*: *ibid.* xiii. Circumstantial case: D. J. Breeze, *Did Hadrian design Hadrian’s Wall?*, *ArchAel* 38, 2009, 87–103; cf. *id.*, *J. Collingwood Bruce’s Handbook to the Roman Wall, Newcastle upon Tyne*<sup>14</sup> 2006, 28. *Mt. Casius*: Yourcenar (n. 4) 191–192.

novel. The fixation reappears in the thought that when Trajan became emperor in 97, Tacitus may have been among those who hoped he would initiate a German military campaign because he had criticised the northern campaigns of Domitian in his biography of Agricola and was about to compose a work on the German peoples of central Europe. The thought is admittedly interesting, yet no more than a historical novelist's thoughts might be.<sup>18</sup>

Presuppositions inherent in the choice of vocabulary, as seen already with Syme, may further affect imaginative reconstruction. If historians are obliged to avoid the overtly anachronistic, they can scarcely avoid being conditioned by their own positions in time and place, the result being that vocabulary chosen to help explain the past may in the event inevitably distort it. Here the Roman emperor has at his disposal „Imperial Horse Guards“, an „Imperial Chief Secretary“, a „Director of Chancery“; his widow can become a „Dowager“, the provincial governor of Egypt is a „Viceroy“, and the senate is „the House“. Men „obtain“ or „resign“ „commissions“ in the Roman army, and some are „NCOs“. No surprise therefore that an analogy with British India can be drawn, or that people in the Roman world „do their bit.“ And when the „old dominion“ is introduced, it will be impossible for some readers not to be reminded of „the dominions beyond the sea“ – and for some to be mystified. They might also wonder about the Roman „high command“: what was it, exactly?<sup>19</sup>

#### IV

Let me now turn to Yourcenar to illustrate from another perspective that the distinction between history and historical fiction might not be rigid. Yourcenar's „Mémoires“ takes the form of an autobiographical letter written by Hadrian at Tivoli near the end of his life – he died aged sixty-two – to the boy who was eventually to become the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Ill, physically deteriorating and anticipating death, Hadrian recounts the story of his life to instruct the boy he has selected one day to succeed him. Whether intentional or not, the conceit is quintessentially Roman: fathers, even adoptive grandfathers, were supposed to prepare their sons for adult life; and it happens that a fragment has survived, which Yourcenar knew, of an apparent copy of an autobiographical letter Hadrian wrote late in his life not to Marcus but to his immediate successor Antoninus Pius (as he became). The reader never reads Marcus' reply, but the question of what he might have learned is a question to ponder. From the outset the reader is engaged with a person obsessed with the self:

„Je suis descendu ce matin chez mon médecin Hermogène, qui vient de rentrer à la Villa après un assez long voyage en Asie. L'examen devait se faire à jeun: nous avons pris rendez-vous pour les premières heures de la matinée. Je me suis couché sur un lit après m'être dépouillé de mon manteau et de ma tunique. Je t'épargne des détails qui te seraient aussi désagréables qu'à moi-même, et la description du corps d'un homme qui avance en âge et s'apprête à mourir d'une hydropisie du coeur.“ (9)

<sup>18</sup> Mons Graupius: Birley, *Hadrian* (n. 4) 128. Thought: *ibid.* 40.

<sup>19</sup> Vocabulary: see Birley, *Hadrian* (n. 4) 21, 35, 39, 40, 70, 93, 125, 128, 138, 156, 235, 262, 288 for random examples. Syme favoured the phrase „the old dominion“, defined as „a blend of Virginia and California“ (RP [n. 4] VI x).

These opening words introduce the physical Hadrian. But a sequence of reflections on hunting, food and wine, love, sleep and sickness quickly takes the reader to the inner man and the quest for self-knowledge that is all-embracing, exposing an indefinable, and unbridgeable, gap between the true self and the acts by which he will be remembered: „Mais il y a entre moi et ces actes dont je suis fait un hiatus indéfinissable.“ The life-story then begins, a story that balances Hadrian's psychological and spiritual development against his physical development and decline.<sup>20</sup>

The emotional range of the reconstructed life is vast. The young Hadrian is an ambitious hedonist, unscrupulous in public and private life. As the mature emperor, however, he is a pragmatic cosmopolitanist, motivated by an ideal of service to humanity, seeking to achieve unity and peace in Rome's empire and to create a new world order grounded on Hellenism, a force that will bind the many into the one. Hellenism is not of course his only passion. His mid-life love for the beautiful Antinous becomes all-consuming, the pleasure taken in his body overwhelming, though ecstasy is tinged with sadness as thoughts of Antinous' loss of youth impinge, and once tragedy intervenes grief is boundless, issuing in the extravagant act of deification. In old age, with love lost and physical infirmity to be patiently endured, all that remains is the contemplation of death, tempered by a quiet confidence that Rome's eternity will guarantee personal immortality and keep alive the ideals of humanity, liberty, and justice. At the very last, a consciousness of human sensibility persists, and courage remains: „Tâchons d'entrer dans la mort les yeux ouverts [...]“<sup>21</sup>

A confessional narrative of this kind requires artifice and imagination. Whether it should be called a novel is a question, to which Yourcenar herself said no even as she recognised that no other term was readily available. She chose not to allow her characters to speak to each other directly, believing that it was impossible for a modern writer to capture the conversational idioms of Roman antiquity when so little can be known about how Romans, even educated Romans, ordinarily spoke, and preferred instead to use only reported speech. The wisdom of her decision was borne out years later in 1962 when Gore Vidal published „Julian“ and concocted conversational expressions that no Roman could ever have uttered. The result of this aesthetic sensibility and feeling for authenticity was an unusual narrative form. Whatever it is formally called, however, the confessional narrative is a fictive creation, intimate and introspective, contrived from thoughts and feelings that the author projects onto her subject from her own life-experience, effective especially because it is written in the first person, a device unavailable to the historian. Yourcenar's purpose was to recover what her English translator Grace Frick rendered as the „inner reality“ of Hadrian, to „evoke Hadrian not only as he was but also as his contemporaries saw him“ – in other words to recover, like the historians, the „real person“ or the „real man“. She stated her objective in a letter of 1951, some months before her book was published: „Il s'agit d'une reconstruction par le dedans des motivations et des pensées du grand empereur libéral et lettré du II<sup>e</sup> siècle.“ Later letters from 1952 and 1954 show that she found the central point of interest in her work to be Hadrian's obsession with discovering the self through the demands made by human rela-

<sup>20</sup> Fragment: Smallwood (n. 2) no. 123; see Yourcenar (n. 4) 339; cf. Birley, Hadrian (n. 4) 299. Quotation: Yourcenar (n. 4) 30.

<sup>21</sup> Quotation: Yourcenar (n. 1) 302. On Hadrian's idealism, see especially *ibid.* 141–142; cf. Yourcenar (n. 1) 13: „un idéal humaniste.“

tionships, and that she was very conscious that her reconstruction, while based as strictly as possible on sources, could not help but arrange the facts of history in a certain way because it was also meant to present „une image tragique de la destinée humaine.“ There were both factual and transcendental goals. A history, however, of the Roman governing class was not one of them: „il y a ensuite le fait que’ Hadrien et Antinoüs sont à peu près seuls à compter dans cette histoire.“<sup>22</sup>

What is given is not necessarily less authentic in my view than the Hadrian of the historians. By this I mean not that the record of what Hadrian did is always accurate – the factual blemishes will not go away – but that the novelist’s invented character can be as historically convincing as the Hadrian fabricated by positivist historians. Take for instance the subject of hunting. Hadrian was an enthusiast, excessively so in early life, it was said (HA Hadr. 2.1), an intrepid opponent of boar and bear who once in Libya saved Antinous from a lion. The passion was commemorated in works of art that include images still visible in Rome on the Arch of Constantine. Birley’s approach to the subject is straightforwardly objective. He observes in his section on the young Hadrian in Baetica that hunting was not a traditional pursuit of the Roman elite and one that Trajan first popularized, offering also an astute regional comment: Spain was abundant in stags, boar, goats and rabbits, which made it perfect country for the sport. A sparse factual record, that is to say, is given a fitting context, to which it could be added that the popularity of hunting is increasingly noticeable from the late first century onwards from the evidence of decorative mosaics found in Roman houses and villas (Syme noted simply that Hadrian was „addicted to hunting, like so many of the provincial aristocracy“).<sup>23</sup>

Yourcenar brings a different point of view. In his early reflections, the elderly Hadrian distinguishes the different effects hunting has had upon him at different stages of his life: as a boy it introduced him to authority, danger, death, courage, pity and the pleasure of witnessing suffering; as a man its clean contests provided relief from his struggles with human rivals, allowing him to develop an ability to judge his enemies’ strength and resources; late in life, his appetite diminished, he sometimes experienced a deep connection with the animal world which brought interrogation and self-understanding: „Qui sait? Peut-être n’ai-je été si économe de sang humain que parce que j’ai tant versé celui des bêtes fauves, que parfois, secrètement, je préférerais aux hommes.“ For Yourcenar’s Hadrian, hunting has a functionalist role in the evolution of his psyche, a claim that cannot be verified in any conventional way, but one that is inherently persuasive and no

<sup>22</sup> Question: Yourcenar wrote in a letter of June 28, 1960 to her Italian translator Lidia Storoni Mazzaloni: „il n’est tout à fait ni une étude historique, ni un poème, encore moins un roman, bien que par commodité nous l’appelons ainsi“ (*Lettres à ses amis et quelques autres*, Paris 1995, 149); cf. K. Kiebusinski, *Questions of genre: history and the self in Marguerite Yourcenar’s Mémoires d’Hadrien*, in: J. H. Sarnecki/I. M. O’Sickey (eds.), *Subversive Subjects: Reading Marguerite Yourcenar*, Cranbury (NJ) 2004, 148–165, 164: the work is „a humanist treatise about the relationship between power and moral knowledge from a twentieth-century perspective.“ Reported speech: see Yourcenar (n. 4) 316. Vidal: „He’s got an herb the Persians use,“ is not quite how I imagine Julian ever spoke (quoted from the Vintage International Edition of *Julian*, New York 2003, 377). Purpose: quotations from the Bibliographical Note in the English translation, *Mémoires of Hadrian* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux edition, New York 1990) 299, 312, which differs in detail from the French edition of 1974. The first phrase is a gloss of „la fidélité aux faits“, the second seems not to appear in the French edition. Frick’s translation was made in collaboration with Yourcenar. *Letters: M. Yourcenar, D’Hadrien à Zénon: Correspondance 1951–1956*, Paris 2004, 27, 136, 302. Quotation: *ibid.* 547.

<sup>23</sup> Birley, *Hadrian* (n. 4) 24. Syme quotation: *Tacitus* (n. 4) 251.

more speculative than many of the claims made by historians to do with the „hard“ historical topics of governance, administration, and politics. Possibilities can be considered.<sup>24</sup>

One reason why a section like this is persuasive is that it is set in a recognisably authentic cultural context. The drive to defeat death is one of the most elemental features of Roman culture, exemplified in literature perhaps most memorably of all by Horace's triumphant declaration that because of his poetry he will never altogether die: *non omnis moriar* (carm. 3.30.1). In society at large the compulsion gave rise to a panoply of death rituals, including commemoration by epitaph, a ubiquitous aspect of Roman behaviour revealed not least by the hundreds of examples that fill the walls of museums and churches in present-day Rome from men, women, and children of every description: the prosperous built tombs and monuments and inscribed their names and records of their deeds upon them, but a commemorative funerary plaque was within reach of even the humble cloak-maker and fish-woman. Appropriately, therefore, Yourcenar's Hadrian is throughout his life conscious of the need to withstand life's brevity: it controls his impulse to build, to compete with poets from the past, to carve his name on the Colossus of Memnon when he travels to Egypt. In words that are fully consistent with Roman cultural norms, the prospect of personal immortality is linked to a sober belief in the eternity of Rome and Rome's cultural legacy:

„Nos livres ne périront pas tous; on réparera nos statues brisées; d'autres coupoles et d'autres frontons naîtront de nos frontons et de nos coupoles; quelques hommes penseront, travailleront et sentiront comme nous: j'ose compter sur ces continueurs placés à intervalles irréguliers le long des siècles, sur cette intermittente immortalité. Si les barbares s'emparent jamais de l'empire du monde, ils seront forcés d'adopter certaines de nos méthodes [...] J'accepte avec calme ces vicissitudes de Rome éternelle.“ (300–301)<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, however, this passage exposes what I think is a significant weakness in Yourcenar's novel. Her Hadrian is a visionary who sees precisely what the future of Rome will be, a feature of the portrait for which there is a genuine historical justification because Hadrian was said to be a devotee of astrology. Syme downplayed the interest, because he found it incompatible with Hadrian's more rational pursuits. But Yourcenar is less conservative, and both here and elsewhere she has Hadrian envisage not only the fall of the Roman Empire and the decline of Latin literature, but, worse, new forms of human oppression that in the longue durée will replace Rome's system of slavery, that cultural blemish for which no apology can be offered. There is nothing wrong of course with creating a prescient Hadrian. The problem is that he is credited with knowledge of a future that only his creator can know, and for this reason it is knowledge that fails to convince.<sup>26</sup>

The descriptions of Hadrian's personality in the historical tradition are unforgettable: *varius, multiplex, multiformis* (*Epitome de Caesaribus* 14.6); *idem severus laetus, comis gravis, lascivus cunctator, tenax liberalis, simulator <dissimulator>, saevus clemens et semper in omnibus varius*

<sup>24</sup> Quotation: Yourcenar (n. 4) 12.

<sup>25</sup> Death rituals: M. Carroll, *Spirits of the Dead: Roman Funerary Commemoration in Western Europe*, Oxford 2006, 30–58. Conscious: Yourcenar (n. 4) 141, 223.

<sup>26</sup> Astrology: Yourcenar (n. 4) 320. Syme: HAP (n. 4) 84–86.

(HA Hadr. 14.11). Like the funerary inscriptions to which I referred a moment ago, however, these lapidary words stand still in time and permit nothing to be seen of personal development as the subject grows and ages. Historians may recognise this, and attribute self-knowledge to specific phases of the emperor's life, as when Syme, as though a novelist, has Hadrian towards the end „conscious of instability in his own character.“ But it is Yourcenar's Hadrian who, without any damage to the ancient notion that character was fixed at birth, most richly makes clear that the individual, any individual, may change in the course of sixty-two years: for to see in „Mémoires“ the emergence of political sensibilities in the young Hadrian, to see the later emperor's discovery that for a greater imperial good compromise must be abandoned, or that decisions of state require particular forms of knowledge; to see the dawning of ideals of universal peace and the sudden perception of godlike capacity – this is to see a figure who in his progress through time and experience is humanly, and historically, credible. Her sensitivity to the evolution of character over time is an important element in the success of Yourcenar's book, whose Hadrian, yes, is fictive, but fraudulent, not at all.<sup>27</sup>

## V

The Hadrian of the „Mémoires“ is at his happiest in the years spent with Antinous. How long this period was cannot be determined. Antinous died on October 24, 130. But when and where he and Hadrian first met and when an emotional bond formed between them are matters beyond knowledge. Traditionally the relationship has been unpalatable as a mainstream historical subject and in engaging with it Royston Lambert did what few modern professionals have dared to do. Syme, recall, altogether avoided the topic, and although he acknowledged, in a footnote, that Lambert's book was „erudite“, he referred to its subject as a „scabrous theme“. Birley in turn speaks of the „personal trauma“ that Antinous' death caused Hadrian, refers repeatedly to Antinous as the „beloved“ or the „favourite“, and as one would expect gives a careful discussion of the circumstances surrounding Antinous' death – with the telling aside that the truth cannot be determined „unless by an historical novelist.“ But the relationship between them is not examined in any detail or connected to Birley's recovery of Hadrian the „real man“.<sup>28</sup>

Royston Lambert was a brilliant Cambridge academic educationalist with special interests in English boarding-school education. For a time he was also headmaster of a private school. He died in 1982 just before his fiftieth birthday, having written his book in the last phase of his life when he had retired from education and lived mainly in Greece. He never saw it in print. Birley calls his book „a remarkable attempt at a biography of the imperial favourite which must not be underrated,“ which in my view is an understatement. It is indeed a fine accomplishment, a meticulous study that starts from a list of basic and important questions: who was Antinous? What did he look like? What sort of person was he? What was the nature of the connection to Hadrian? How did he die? What happened to his remains? What effect did his death have on Hadrian? Definitive

<sup>27</sup> Syme quotation: RP (n. 4) III 1178. Progress: cf. Tacitus (n. 4) 249: „He was constrained to dissemble – and his personality hardened.“

<sup>28</sup> Syme quotations: RP (n. 4) VI 174. Syme was presumably familiar with Lambert's remark (n. 4) 76: „Even Sir Ronald Syme, not a scholar to avoid an issue, confines himself to the cryptic and headmasterly observation: ‚some of his habits are known‘“ (= Syme, Tacitus [n. 4] 249). Birley quotations: Hadrian (n. 4) 2, 249.

solutions are obviously impossible. But Lambert is not afraid to draw bold conclusions, maintaining for instance that Hadrian first met Antinous in 123 when Antinous was a member of a school of imperial pages, but that their intimacy dates only from the winter of 127/128, when Antinous had joined the imperial entourage and the imperial party was in North Africa. As he explores his questions, Lambert draws broadly on Roman religious and social as well as political history, opening up the rich texture of the Roman past to flesh out his narrative. He associates Hadrian's initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries in Greece in 128 with a divine self-consciousness and a conception of world unity underpinned by theocracy; he sharply distinguishes Roman from Greek attitudes in his discussion of pederasty in antiquity; and he sets out effectively the geographical and chronological extent, well into late antiquity, of the cult of Antinous, with scrupulous attention to the evidence of sculpture and portraiture. Like the historians of antiquity, moreover, Lambert tells his story in dramatically fashioned episodes, instilling his account for instance of Hadrian's arrival in Egypt with a sense of impending doom, and filling his pages on the destruction of Antinoopolis, the city that Hadrian founded to honour Antinous, with a real sadness. His book is a history, in short, that reads like a novel.<sup>29</sup>

Inevitably there are some points to query. The vigorous family life of the Romans and what Lambert calls their „peasant realism“ are to my mind overstated. The notion that the faith of mystery cults in Hadrian's age was overtaking the stale forms of traditional Roman religion clings to Christianising assumptions about Roman history that even in 1984 were outmoded, although the emphasis on the Dionysian, salvationist nature of the cult of Antinous may well be right, and the insistence on the Christian preoccupation with sex and sin is beyond doubt. Also, Lambert chooses not to engage at all with Yourcenar – because she had written a novel? – despite the notable remark that it was she, not professional historians, who had written „the broadest, the most balanced and in many ways the most authentic interpretation“ of the story of Hadrian and Antinous. At large, however, the book is thoroughly absorbing, confident in its control of sources and scholarship, and full of arresting features.<sup>30</sup>

The most arresting feature of all is the manner in which Lambert explains the history of Hadrian and Antinous in terms of „psychological probabilities“. It is here that the book's special distinction and focus lie. Hadrian is presented as a figure who in early life was given little affection and who as an adult – lonely, insecure, affected by melancholy, self-absorbed, emotionally stunted, sexually confused, histrionic and driven to excel by an inferiority complex – had little affection to give. His relationship with Antinous was consequently fraught and obsessive, and it ended in Lambert's view when Antinous, keenly aware of the problems raised by his physical maturation and as obsessed with Hadrian as Hadrian was with him, offered himself as a living sacrifice to save both of them from danger: „Better,“ Lambert writes, „he may have thought, to be a dead and hallowed martyr than a living and forgotten has-been“, a conclusion that fits with everything that is known from the factual record and the psychology of the protagonists that can be inferred from it. Antinous in other words becomes the son who dies for the

<sup>29</sup> Lambert: the personal information is taken from an obituary notice in King's College, Cambridge: Annual Report of the Council Under Statute, D., III, 10 on the General and Educational Condition of the College, October 1983, 29–32. Birley quotation: Hadrian (n. 4) 8.

<sup>30</sup> Lambert (n. 4) 81, 12.

father, with Hadrian perhaps temporarily driven out of his mind by the loss, and his control of public affairs adversely affected.<sup>31</sup>

The method is clearly controversial, and the criticism can easily be made that history should have nothing to do with explanations of this kind. Consider two further typical passages. First, a statement on Hadrian's attachment to his mother-in-law Matidia:

„We do not have to be psychological experts to connect this close and idealised mother-relationship with Hadrian's homosexual leanings and with his inability to create a happy and sexually complete partnership with his wife.“ (91)

Well, yes, no, and maybe. To take Hadrian's marriage to Sabina alone: allowing that it was a political match, arranged according to tradition by Trajan's wife Plotina, how can it be truly understood, and must it be judged according to modern standards? Until her death late in the reign, Sabina was always in the public eye, included in the imperial retinue and portrayed on the coinage as a model of female modesty. On the obelisk that celebrates Antinous now on the Pincio in Rome, she is called „the great royal lady beloved by him, the queen of both countries, Sabina, who lives, is safe and healthy, Augusta, who lives for ever.“ She was quickly admitted to the pantheon when she died. The obvious question to ask is what this public evidence says about the private character of the marriage: was it all political theatre, all for the sake of empire? Secondly, a paragraph which describes what may have been in Hadrian's mind when the mummified body of Antinous was about to be interred in Egypt some months after his death. It shows both the interest in psychology, Lambert's rhetorical effectiveness, and his heavily romanticised view of the past:

„Contemplating this final, harrowing moment, the Emperor, having had long months to brood on his loss and to devise a new ecumenical cult for Antinous, may have interposed. He had claims over Antinous, who may have died for him, stronger than those of the Egyptians. Having delivered over the body to the priests of the Nile for the violations necessary for spiritual perpetuation, was he to abandon it for ever to Egyptian soil? This may have been an ultimate separation which Hadrian found impossible to accept. The ceremonial boat on which the gilded coffin of Antinous lay may have been replaced, in the middle of 131, by a real one on which he was transported, over the seas, to his final resting place.“ (146)

The passage is utterly fanciful. Of the five sentences it contains, four are governed by the phrase „may have“ and the fifth is a rhetorical question. As with much else in the book on the thoughts and emotions of the main characters, from a conventional point of view it could simply be dismissed.<sup>32</sup>

Conventional historians, however, are known to enter the minds of their subjects without undue difficulty and to make similar observations. Syme attributes to Hadrian's now almost completely lost autobiography, written late in life, the story that Hadrian was im-

<sup>31</sup> Lambert (n. 4) 133, 142.

<sup>32</sup> Coinage: see Mattingly (n. 2) 355, 537, cf. 540. Obelisk: text from Boatwright, *City of Rome* (n. 2) 244; Lambert (n. 4) 49 and Birley, *Hadrian* (n. 4) 255 both have Hadrian personally responsible for the obelisk's inscriptions.

peded by L. Julianus Servianus in his attempt in 98 to deliver the news of the emperor Nerva's death to Trajan in the Rhineland (HA Hadr. 2.6), and he has no hesitation in seeing in it the emperor's „malevolence“ and „the condition of Hadrian's mind towards the end.“ Relying as much, I think, on intuition as anything else, he was confident indeed that Hadrian, in his last two years, was „angry and erratic, broken in health, and tortured by the vexatious problem of the succession,“ and that from the outset he had „formed his character and tastes in deliberate opposition to his formidable predecessor,“ a remark that has more than a passing resemblance to words from the Hadrian of Yourcenar: „j'étais multiple par calcul.“ Birley comparably writes of Hadrian at Tarraco in 123 that a wish „to be seen as a new Augustus [...] had clearly been in his mind for some time.“ The apparent weakness of Lambert's approach is not therefore as clear-cut as it first seems, and once more the issue of historical recovery emerges as a complex problem. It is undeniable that Lambert's portrait of Hadrian is self-consistent and compelling, and, most importantly, that his novel-like speculations are grounded on evidence which is interpreted with full allowance for historical context. It follows that his views are again no more and no less implausible than many put forward in more formal writing. The Hadrian Lambert presents may not be the real Hadrian, but like the Hadrian of Yourcenar, he is a real Hadrian.<sup>33</sup>

## VI

Elizabeth Speller's biography „Following Hadrian“ is another variation on the theme of combining fact and fiction for historical purposes. Speller concentrates on personality, and Hadrian duly comes to life in her book as the lonely loner, ambitious from the outset, variously cruel and superstitious, sickly yet virile, affected by melancholy if not depression – Speller is stronger on this than others – inspired by history, mysterious and magnetic. There is much, as there must be, on Hadrian the itinerant cosmopolitanist and prince of peace; but given the attention to the inner man, Speller's Hadrian is, once more, „like a character in a modern novel“, and her book as a whole, a very personal book, again has the feel of a novel. Its great strength is the creation of strong emotional effect through telling circumstance and anecdote, and not surprisingly Yourcenar and Lambert are two of the three predecessors to whom she acknowledges special debts. Birley is the third. Syme, however, is virtually unknown to her: Speller has no interest in, and perhaps little awareness of, prosopography and the technical problems of the *Historia Augusta*, and no account is taken consequently of Syme's contributions to Hadrian's public history.<sup>34</sup>

Lively evocations of place are one of the book's finest novel-like qualities. Speller has travelled widely across the Mediterranean, following Hadrian to see for herself where he journeyed, and she infuses her book with observations and reminiscences to make her reader constantly aware that Hadrian's world of long ago is still accessible, that to see the now is somehow to understand the then. Her biography moves its reader, nowhere for the reader of a certain age more memorably than in her pages on the Allied assault

<sup>33</sup> Syme quotations: RP (n. 4) VI 400; III 1443; V 551. Yourcenar quotation: (n. 4) 67. Birley quotation: Hadrian (n. 4) 147.

<sup>34</sup> The only work by Syme she cites is *The Roman Revolution*. The five lines devoted to the *Historia Augusta* with their summary statement, „It is charming, eccentric and unreliable – but not necessarily untrue“ (Speller [n. 4] xiv) are astonishing.

on Monte Cassino and the liberation of Rome in 1944, where the combination of despair and triumph she achieves is a great success and reveals an enviable ability to draw connections between ancient Rome and the modern world. Her awareness of the price paid by many in the past that allows Hadrian's eternal city to be enjoyed by others today is palpable, and of special meaning to readers who cherish *The Italy Star* their fathers won. Elsewhere she captures the Wall's remoteness by quoting a text inscribed on one of its stones now in the British Military Cemetery in Rome, sent from the city of Carlisle to honour local servicemen who died in the Second World War. She also paints, more happily, a delightful and affecting picture of walking in the Borghese Gardens and sensing there the presence of Antinous as she approaches the obelisk on the Pincio. Here she is in full flight in a typically evocative passage on Tivoli. It is not difficult to understand in reading it that Speller is not only a travel writer and journalist but a poet as well:

„A visit to the luminous ruins of Hadrian's villa is one of the most delightful ways of spending time in or around Rome. Shady avenues between cypresses, olive groves and pools of silent water are interrupted by empty fountain bowls and vacant plinths, haunting and potent architectural echoes of magnificence. It is easy to scramble freely through empty doorways and over fallen stone to enter one small, roofless space after another. Inner courtyards contain broken brick and wild flowers, while broad steps and colonnades now lead into ploughed fields and wide views of the Campagna. Arches of long-dismantled public rooms provide shade at midday, and here and there a mosaic pavement or a still attached fragment of porphyry provides a visual echo of what once glittered on this spot. In some more restored parts of the complex, replica statues recreate the second-century environs, but mostly the remains are tantalising in what they hint at. That they are still so substantial after so long is testament to Hadrian's demands for excellence in structure as well as style.“ (242–243)<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the most novel-like feature of Speller's experiment is her invention, or near invention, of a quasi-fictional character in order to create a female perspective on the male-dominated historical record. This is Julia Balbilla, grand-daughter of the last king of Commagene, who was a real person and travelled to Egypt in 130 as companion to Sabina, and who inscribed some of her elegiac verses (she was a poet also) on the Colossus of Memnon:

„I, Balbilla, when the rock spoke, heard the voice of the divine Memnon or Phamenoth. I came here with the lovely Empress Sabina. The course of the sun was in its first hour, in the fifteenth year of Hadrian's reign, on the twenty-fourth day of the month Hathor. [I wrote this] on the twenty-fifth day.“<sup>36</sup>

Speller begins each chapter of her book by quoting extensively from Balbilla's writings, not from her poetry, however, but from her memoirs, and this is where the invention

<sup>35</sup> See particularly Speller (n. 4) 243–245, 254–257.

<sup>36</sup> The quotation from Balbilla is adapted from M. Lefkowitz/M. B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Baltimore <sup>2</sup>1992, 10.

occurs because the memoirs are a fabricated work. Speller's aim is to recreate the personalities of Hadrian and Sabina, as a member of the imperial court, with all its intrigue, might have known them, from a document that sheds new light on history. Sabina thus emerges at one point as responsible for the dismissal of Suetonius, the author of „The Lives of the Caesars“, from Hadrian's service, a dismissal that did indeed occur, although the circumstances involved can never be fully known from the brief (and textually un-sound) statement in the Augustan life that provides the evidence (HA Hadr. 11.3) (Yourcenar had similarly portrayed him as a clever man, and imaginatively packed him off to a small house in the Sabine hills). Balbilla is speaking:

„There was a man once, his secretary, Suetonius, a clever, cruel man who made her laugh – she told me – but who, like so many, overstepped the mark, made some quip about the emperor, thought he was safe perhaps, thought he was being kind, did not understand that she was him. Hadrian sent him back to Rome at her request. Anyway the man, for all his charm, his *bons mots*, was a dangerous person to have at court; a writer, always scribbling, watching.“ (137)

This is a smart device, one that responds perhaps to Yourcenar's monopoly of the autobiographical narrative, to Lambert's special interest in the psychology of Hadrian and Antinous, and to Birley's primacy in the field of historical biography. But it does not work well. As each chapter begins Julia Balbilla is the first-person object of attention; yet she is soon cut off as the main third-person narrative of Hadrian's life takes over, abruptly and awkwardly. The jolting effect is one reason why Speller's book falls between two stools and is neither novel nor biography, whatever the affection for Roman antiquity it conveys. The embellishment of meagre sources, as in the example of Suetonius' dismissal, can add to the distress.<sup>37</sup>

Vivid impressions, moreover, are often privileged over details of when or where a particular episode in Hadrian's life falls, and there is a disturbing implication throughout the book, a kind of undertone, that matters of time and place, too many „facts“, must be avoided as though undesirable. Also the main narrative is driven by what I think is a common weakness in imperial biography, the tendency seen already in Yourcenar to think of the course of history as inevitable in view of what the author knows to have happened in the end. So, for example, because Hadrian became emperor he must have wanted the throne and politicked to secure it long before Trajan's death – nothing else is possible on the principle of biographical predetermination – no matter what the problems of evidence involved in showing this. It is ironic therefore that a long discussion of how Antinous died reaches a verdict of *non liquet* because the evidence is inconclusive. None of this, however, alters the fact that there are some splendidly suggestive passages in Speller's book that fully bring to life the physical qualities and dimensions of Hadrian's world. It can be empathetically read crossing the lowlands of Scotland into northern England by train on a rainy afternoon late in summer, as mists on craggy hills and streams in full rush reveal how unenviable it must have been to be stationed as a soldier on Hadrian's Wall.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Distress: Speller (n. 4) 144 defines Suetonius' position of *ab epistulis* as that of a „personal secretary“ to Hadrian, which is not altogether accurate. She devises a sensationalistic cause for his dismissal: composition of the work called „The Lives of Famous Whores“.

<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that Speller writes for a non-academic audience.

## VII

The first point to make about Thorsten Opper's „Hadrian: Empire and Conflict“ is that it should not be regarded simply as an exhibition catalogue. It contains an annotated list of the items in the British Museum exhibition, and its profuse and lavish illustrations, one of its finest features, are beautiful reminders for those fortunate enough to have seen them of what was on display. But Opper does not confine himself to discussing the individual artifacts of the exhibition; instead he offers a genuinely historical study of Hadrian, written with a museum-going readership in mind to be sure and not meant to be comprehensive, but a study based on an extensive body of new research that requires evaluation as an original contribution to Hadrianic historiography. Appropriately for a book written by a museum curator and specialist in Greek and Roman sculpture, it gives pride of place to material evidence, which in view of the traditional division in classical studies between history and art history is much to be applauded: of the works discussed so far, it is those notably of the non-specialists Yourcenar and Lambert that make the most of sculptural and other archaeological evidence for Hadrian's life and reign. As he defines the scope of his book, however, Opper distances himself as a professional from the pursuit of Hadrian's personality found in Yourcenar – „an exploration of his individuality, while certainly intriguing, beyond a certain point is best left to the novelist“ – and in a footnote he separates himself from Lambert by distinguishing the latter's use of literary sources (commendably treated) from his use of archaeological material (less so). At the same time, while Birley's influence is unmistakable, that of Syme is no more than marginal, and reference to Speller extends only to a bibliographical citation. The book therefore has clear limits, and if it brings some real gains for knowledge, it also leaves some perplexing questions.<sup>39</sup>

Three items stand out as invigoratingly positive contributions. A fine discussion, first, of the Pantheon makes a strong claim for Hadrian as its inspirational force – he had a „vision for the monument“ – even as a radical new theory is acknowledged that this greatest of Roman temples might well have been begun in the late years of Trajan. Second, a fine discussion of Tivoli makes clear the vastness of the resources that the emperor was able to mobilise for the construction of the villa, and, importantly, indicates how knowledge of Hadrian is constantly increasing as new excavations are conducted, the recent discovery of an Antinoon permitting suitable inferences about the history of Antinous and his cult. Here too Hadrian's genius as an architectural designer is emphasised as the complex is attributed to him. Third, a fine discussion of the Wall comes complete with a description of Rome's annexation of Britain and the immediate military circumstances in the early second century that led to Hadrian's decision to build it. Opper is cautious on the question of whether Hadrian was ever present on the line of the Wall itself, for which as seen earlier the evidence is unclear, but he tends to believe so, and is unambiguous that the decision to build was Hadrian's own. He is indeed tempted to follow Birley in believing that the person majestically addressed in a petition discovered at Vindolanda, one of the Latin documents that have miraculously come to light at the site over the last thirty years, might well be Hadrian, the object of an appeal in 122 from

<sup>39</sup> Quotation: Opper (n. 4) 31. There is a certain irony here: the British Museum exhibition gave signal attention to Yourcenar, displaying some of her manuscripts (the first items to be seen) and showing her portrait; she is also given some attention in the book. But the distancing remains. See *ibid.* 241 n. 17 for Opper's rejection of Lambert's chronology of the history of Hadrian and Antinous.

a mistreated subject who took the opportunity of the emperor's presence to secure redress. Opper's confidence that Hadrian was the instigating force behind the major building projects mentioned is not at all in doubt.<sup>40</sup>

Valuable results also emerge from discussions of individual objects or categories of physical evidence, especially evidence that concerns Hadrian and Hellenism. A statue from Cyrene that apparently represents the emperor wearing a Greek himation is shown to have a head and body that do not belong together and so cannot reveal any putative desire on Hadrian's part to have himself portrayed as a devotee of Greek culture. Hadrian's beard, so notorious an element of his iconography and so often associated with his assumed Hellenic tastes, is shown to be the mark of a military man, not that of a Greek philosopher as commonly believed. And the enormous building programme at Athens and the institution of the Greek league known as the Panhellenion are presented as aspects of a strategy intended to elicit Greek loyalty to Rome, not to promote Hellenism for its own sake. The implications for traditional views of Hadrian's attitudes to Greeks and Greek culture are sharp.<sup>41</sup>

It becomes possible too to learn something of the experiences of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire other than those who comprised the socio-political elite on whom historical attention generally concentrates. The building boom at Rome that produced the Pantheon and other monuments in the Campus Martius, the temple to Venus and Rome at the end of the Sacred Way, and the Mausoleum across the Tiber, offered opportunities for labour on a grand scale – for construction workers and those who made bricks and concrete, and for those all across the empire who quarried marbles and transported them, by land and sea, to the building sites where they were needed. Vast numbers of artisans and workers, many probably slaves, were also required for building and maintaining the villa at Tivoli, for the new structures at Athens, for the foundation of Antinoopolis, and for Hadrian's many other provincial projects. As account is taken of the production of olive-oil in Spain, which Opper judges an important factor behind the rise to political prominence at Rome of a „Spanish elite“ to which Hadrian belonged, attention falls on the numberless individuals who made the oil and conveyed it to Rome, where the scale of operations involved is marked by the remains of the amphoras in which it was carried that are still piled high at Monte Testaccio. Illustrations of prosaic pots and sherds accompany illustrations of luxury objects in Opper's book, and allow his readers to reflect on the anonymous multitudes the upper orders comprehensively exploited in Rome of the imperial age. Rostovtzeff comes irresistibly to mind.<sup>42</sup>

Various issues nonetheless keep alive the theme of the credible and the fictional. First, Spanish oil. It cannot be doubted that magnates from Baetica made fortunes from producing olive-oil, or that they and their descendants subsequently used their fortunes to pursue high office at Rome and gain admission to the ranks of the ruling oligarchy. Such

<sup>40</sup> Quotation: Opper (n. 4) 111; cf. 123. Pantheon: its architectural legacy as seen in the Reading Room of the British Museum in which the recent exhibition was held is well brought out. New theory: L. M. Hetland, *Dating the Pantheon*, JRA 20, 2008, 95–112. Description: owing much to D. J. Breeze's revision of J. Collingwood Bruce's *Handbook to the Roman Wall* (n. 17). Petition: A. K. Bowman/J. D. Thomas, *The Vindolanda Writing-Tablets (Tabulae Vindolandeses II)*, London 1994, nos. 180, 344, with Birley, Hadrian (n. 4) 134–135.

<sup>41</sup> See particularly Birley, Hadrian (n. 4) 69–72, 128–129.

<sup>42</sup> M. I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, second edition revised by P. M. Fraser, Oxford 1957.

people might reasonably be called a Spanish elite. But to characterise them as a new and cohesive entity in imperial politics in the early Antonine age, ambitious to establish a Spanish ascendancy in the capital and represented above all by Hadrian, seems an exaggeration. Roman senators from Spain have a long history that stretches back through the first century of the Principate to the age of Julius Caesar, with L. Cornelius Balbus of Gades (Cadiz) being the first man, in 40 BC, to hold the consulship. An isolated case he may have been, but half a century before Hadrian under Nero there were men of Spanish origin who had achieved political ascendancy at Rome, most notably the shrewd philosopher Seneca. Moreover, as Syme above all revealed, the emergence of senators from Spain was part of a much broader historical process that from the revolutionary age onwards gradually brought men from outlying parts of Italy and the provinces into the ranks of the Roman ruling class, a process in which ethnicity was less a determinant than wealth, ambition, and connections to sources of established power. Of this process, however, nothing is to be seen and the gains of prosopographical history are neglected. Certainly it can be said that the rise of the Antonines represented the triumph of a faction in Roman politics that included men of Spanish origin; but the faction did not include every early second-century senator from Spain, and as Syme repeatedly demonstrated, it was in any case Spanish and Narbonensian, not Spanish alone. As he said for instance in „Spaniards at Tivoli“ (one of the few papers by Syme Opper cites): „The Spanish consulars at Tibur are only a collection, not a group or a ‚circle‘ of the type so often conjured up in the pages of literature. No ties of kinship or allegiance are perceptible, such as the alliances that formed at Rome between the rising families from Spain and Narbonensis.“ It seems unlikely, therefore, that a desire to mark the primacy of a Spanish elite motivated Hadrian to build his Mausoleum.<sup>43</sup>

Second, cultural unity. Hadrian has long been regarded as a promoter of imperial unity, though in what sense is a matter of debate. Opper sees signs of growing cultural unification in the empire in Hadrian's ability to appropriate materials for his building projects from distant regions, and in the promotion of Greek aesthetic forms at Rome itself as seen, for example, in the design of the temple to Venus and Rome. The beautiful series of Hadrian's coins that show personifications of the provinces and their emblems offers perhaps the most cogent evidence of an aspiration to mould the empire's disparate parts into an organic whole. If so, however, aspiration needs to be distinguished from reality. Allowance might be made for the high culture shared by the socially advantaged that was the product chiefly of the literary education in which men and women of high status were saturated. But the diversity of local cultures across the empire at large, in language, religion and art, remains an undeniable fact of life, and one that implicated far greater numbers of people than the few whose elevated voices now dominate the historical record. Also, while the impact of high Greek culture on Rome and the western Mediterranean as a whole is again undeniable, it has to be remembered that cultural traffic in antiquity did not always flow in a single direction from east to west: the architectural history of Roman Athens is enough to show that sometimes the opposite was the case, which means that it might be preferable, in architecture especially, to think in terms of Greco-Roman forms manifesting themselves synthetically from place to place, rather than of fixed Greek forms constantly moving into a cultural vacuum. If, moreover, Hadrian's long tours of the provinces and the legends that appeared on his

<sup>43</sup> Syme quotation: RP (n. 4) IV 113.

coins suggest a paternalistic compulsion to achieve stability and prosperity within the empire's component regions and to oversee their well-being, this is rather different from the promotion of cultural unity. The extent in any case to which hopes of consolidation were realized and to which peace and a golden age were ushered in is difficult to tell when the historical record is so imperfect, the military record in particular. In Britain, archaeology now suggests that military operations may have been far more extensive than usually thought, while Hadrian's abandonment of Trajan's conquests in the east, which Opper takes as a sign of astuteness and strength, did not lead to any permanent resolution of the problems posed by the eastern frontier. Whatever the gains Hadrian may have envisaged from his defensive frontier fortifications, they cannot have been more than superficial. By the time of Marcus' accession, disaster was at hand.<sup>44</sup>

Third, conflict, a notion prominent in the book's subtitle. According to tradition Hadrian encountered various conflicts during his life. Some were personal, some political, some perhaps both. His relationship with Trajan was strained, his relationship with Sabina ambiguous if not difficult, and he is said to have been vengeful enough to order the execution of Apollodorus, the architect who once criticised his drawings. Further, his reign began and ended with the execution of rivals, and when he died, he was universally hated (so it is said). A complex personality could be seen as the source of all these frictions, and Hadrian was remembered, it is clear, as a bundle of contradictions. All personalities are complex, however, and this is hardly a satisfactory explanation. An older contemporary of Hadrian's, the writer of literary letters Pliny, speaks of a friend's varied, flexible and multifaceted mind in language much like that in which Hadrian is traditionally characterised (epist. 1.16.1), but in a tone that is approving and complimentary, not critical or hostile. Opper notes the descriptions of Hadrian's personality found in the sources, but unlike his predecessors he tends to avoid the subject itself, the passing remark apart that Hadrian was „a much darker character than commonly thought and only too human.“ Precisely what the conflict is therefore that he perceives remains unclear. Perhaps it has something to do with Antinous, but the chapter Opper devotes to him focuses on the technical issues of the artistic evidence concerned and personal matters are largely skirted. The mind of Hadrian might well be detected in the vision of empire Opper ascribes to him, in which the emphasis falls on consolidation and retrenchment, delimitation and ornamentation; yet the vision itself seems altogether devoid of conflict, despite the awfulness of Rome's conflict with the Jews and the terrible war Hadrian fought that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem („May his bones rot!“). In the end, therefore, while the book brings to the fore material evidence on Hadrian in a way that previous studies have not, the evidence is not enough by itself, for all its richness and appeal, to allow the real Hadrian to be fully seen.<sup>45</sup>

## VIII

My initial question of how the past can be recovered is both banal and profound. It has no satisfactory answer, other than to affirm Syme's pronouncement that historians come in „many types and many tribes“. The main points I have wanted to illustrate are that conventional history, by nature a fictive enterprise, is often more fictional than it seems and is always provisional in its findings; that fictional history in the form of the historical novel or

<sup>44</sup> Coins: see notably still, Toynbee (n. 2).

<sup>45</sup> Quotation: Opper (n. 4) 11. Antinous: note the sensationalistic, and ahistorical, beginning of the chapter: „Hadrian was gay“ (Opper [n. 4] 168).

the imaginative reconstruction may sometimes succeed as well as or even surpass conventional history – texture and emotion are as important to history as chronography and geography – and that the past might sometimes be successfully evoked through methods that push facts to the limit. It is the distinction of the final product, the quality of achievement that is most significant rather than its form. Traditional and non-traditional forms might lead to insights of universal application. The works I have examined all succeed in recovering Hadrian, but in different ways, according to their authors' interests and presumptions. Control of evidence, imagination and artful style – abiding style – these are the key factors. Limitations are imposed by time, place and personal disposition, for recovery of the past is a subjective enterprise and historical knowledge can never be absolute. Hadrian is not altogether elusive, but the capacity of even the most accomplished investigator to master every element of his history is open to doubt. In the event, no more than aspects of his history are exposed and possibilities raised. New evidence emerges all the time to make revision essential, so that verse inspired by Antinous does not automatically have to be ascribed to the obvious poetic candidate Pancrates; and if indeed the Pantheon is attributed to Trajan, serious consequences ensue for the design and doctrine of Hadrian.<sup>46</sup>

One element of Hadrian's history that is uncontroversial is that like every Roman emperor he was obliged to spend much of his time in routine administration. A wealth of evidence displays attention to duty: a huge volume of legal rulings embodied in Justinian's *Digest* and other legal sources, and more letters to communities and officials on administrative matters than for any other emperor. The legal rulings include decisions that slaves were to be punished if they did not come to the aid of their owners when the latter were under assault; that the clothes of condemned criminals were to be put to good use by provincial governors and not kept by torturers or other functionaries; that Roman soldiers released from barbarian captivity were to be reinstated as long as they had escaped and were not deserters. The letters include rulings on tax-relief for the fish-merchants of Eleusis, on inheritance rights for soldiers' children born of concubine mothers, addressed to the Prefect of Egypt, and, in a new dossier, on exemption from a tax on nails for the people of Aphrodisias in Caria. Even in his last, declining months, Hadrian wrote to the obscure community of Naryka in central Greece to confirm its status as a city-state (*polis*). Personality traits have been detected in this material: irritability and annoyance. How the details can be shaped into a whole and integrated with the mass of other materials into a total history, or historical biography, of Hadrian remains a challenge. The Millaresque administrator is not an easy fit with the visionary cosmocrator and creator of new gods who to many was in his own person already himself divine. But however the challenge is met, it will scarcely help if barriers are maintained between one fictive literary form and another, if the possibility is not admitted that the imaginative writer might sometimes succeed in recovering the past as well as the historian.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Syme quotation: RP (n. 4) VI 72. Universal: Yourcenar (n. 8) 62, critical of historians, remarked that fiction was the best way to recover the human and universal. Pantheon: Hetland (n. 40). For Pancrates and other Hadrianic poets, including Julia Balbilla, see E. L. Bowie, Greek Poetry in the Antonine Age, in: D. R. Russell (ed.), *Antonine Literature*, Oxford 1990, 53–90 with P. Oxy. 4352, published in *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* LXIII, London 1996, and accompanying materials.

<sup>47</sup> Rescripts: Dig. 29.5.1.28; 48.20.6; 49.16.5.6; see in full Gualandi (n. 2) I 24–57. Pringsheim (n. 2) 152–153 found Hadrian's legislative activity marked by a statesmanlike „discipline [...] order and clearness.“ Letters: Smallwood (n. 2) no. 333; Oliver (n. 2) no. 77; Reynolds (n. 2); Jones (n. 2). Personality traits: W. Williams, Individuality in the imperial constitutions: Hadrian and the Antonines, *JRS* 66, 1976, 67–83, at 69.

I close with a completely different type of evocation from anything earlier considered. W. H. Auden's poem „Roman Wall Blues“, at once amusing and sad, was written in October 1937 for a programme about Hadrian's Wall that was broadcast on BBC radio a month later on November 25. It captures and communicates a moment and a mood of history. Auden was well-informed about Roman Britain, and he evidently sensed the sacrifices that might be expected of the ordinary soldier posted far from his homeland on the most northerly limit of Rome's empire. The Roman soldier he creates as the speaker of his poem is exactly the sort of figure to whom faraway relatives sent care packages of socks, sandals and underwear, as can now be understood from the new documents from Vindolanda, the first of which were discovered in 1973, the year of Auden's death. To most who see or know of it, the Wall is a symbol of a period of history no more than dimly known, but it is a monument that can quicken the historical imagination, with a poem, in this instance, the outcome. It might well have appealed to the author of *Animula, vagula, blandula*. Here it is:

Over the heather the wet wind blows,  
I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose.  
The rain comes pattering out of the sky,  
I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why.  
The mist creeps over the hard grey stone.  
My girl's in Tungria; I sleep alone.  
Aulus goes hanging around her place,  
I don't like his manners, I don't like his face.  
Piso's a Christian, he worships a fish;  
There'd be no kissing if he had his wish.  
She gave me a ring but I diced it away;  
I want my girl and I want my pay.  
When I'm a veteran with only one eye  
I shall do nothing but look at the sky.<sup>48</sup>

### Summary

This essay reviews ways in which the emperor Hadrian has been portrayed in works of history, biography, and fiction. It is a historiographical study that implicitly raises questions about how the life and personality of a particular historical figure might be recovered and understood.

Key words: Hadrian, römischer Kaiser, 117–138, moderne Geschichtsschreibung

<sup>48</sup> W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. E. Mendelson, New York 1991, 143. The transcript of the BBC radio programme, „Hadrian's Wall: An Historical Survey“, can be read in E. Mendelson (ed.), *Plays and Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden 1928–1938*, Princeton 1988, 441–445 (with editor's commentary, 674–676). On Vindolanda, see especially A. K. Bowman, *Outposts of empire: Vindolanda, Egypt, and the empire of Rome*, *JRA* 19, 2006, 75–93. Care packages: Bowman/Thomas (n. 40) no. 346. Auden's poem is more authentic than perhaps he realised. It was said that Hadrian once struck a slave in a fit of anger and caused the man to lose an eye, and that when the remorseful emperor later asked the man to name any gift he wished as recompense, the slave replied that all he wanted was to have his eye (Gal. V 17–18K; see Birley, *Hadrian* [n. 4] 167 for a remarkable explanation).