

## Response to my Commentators

THE PRECEDING commentaries by Richard Connors, Lisa Cody, John Smail, and Rachel Weil offer an invaluable perspective from which to rethink some major features of my study. I will discuss what seem to me the most important of these, both clarifying my ideas and elaborating them in directions these commentaries have fruitfully opened up.

Halfway through the composition of *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge* I became aware of a motive for writing that had long been latent in my thinking about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British history, but only at this point could be articulated. For decades the period from 1650 to 1800, loosely enclosed within the category of “the Enlightenment,” has been criticized for bearing the seeds of much that is wrong with modernity in the West; by this account, it is only through such relatively recent revisionism that the bane of Enlightenment thinking has been moderated. Yet it was clear to me that the late modern critique of the Enlightenment derives its method and force from the Enlightenment itself, which in many ways had never really ended. This much had consciously informed my work for many years. What I now came to see was that *The Secret History* attempted to address this misconception by the disarmingly simple strategy of “view[ing] the past not only as a prelude to our present but also as a response to its own past”: not only as vulnerable to future criticism, but also as a powerfully critical reaction against the hand history had dealt it (p. xxvii). To put this another way, without denying the need to explain the early modern period in terms that were not its own, I also wanted to interpret it in terms that its contemporaries would have recognized as familiar and plausible.

Invaluable as historical method, in application the distinction between “explanation” and “interpretation” is complicated and variable. In *The Secret History* I have found it imperative to summarize my argument in a number of abstract, “explanatory” frameworks that as historical generalizations inevitably exceed the perspective of the culture they describe. No doubt the most important of these generalizations is the triad distinction/separation/conflation. The first of these terms stands for the way “traditional” English culture conceives and experiences some of the central categories of existence — public and private, but also state and civil society, society and individual, polity and economy, status and class, sex and gender, family honour and personal virtue, cultural and personal religion, supernatural dispensations and empirical sense impressions, the

didactic and the aesthetic — as “distinct” but inseparable from one another. In the period of my major concern, however, these paired categories come to seem, and to be lived as, fully separable, participating in a modern “separation out” that is the necessary precondition for the modern and critical “conflation” of supposedly separate categories that begins in the Enlightenment and continues to fuel what is wrongly thought to be the anti-Enlightenment impulse of late modernity. So, as Rachel Weil suggests, what I call the “Age of Separations” is therefore also the “Age of Conflations.” (On the face of it, distinction and conflation share a centripetal or unifying principle. However, because it is premised on the separation it undertakes to criticize, modern conflation is a self-conscious process that brings together categories explicitly understood to be free-standing, and it is therefore very different from the traditional condition of distinction, of which the unifying principle is prior and tacit because it is grounded in the unthinkability of separation.)

If explanatory schemes like distinction/separation/conflation exceed the self-understanding of early modern English people, they also help clarify the nature of the changes that occurred in this period and the motives by which contemporaries either celebrated or condemned those changes. Explanatory formulations are fruitful, in other words, because of the role they play in the dialectical process by which broad heuristic hypotheses invite the sort of substantiation, correction, or complication that can be found only through the closely focused interpretation of textual evidence. Abstraction is not only the antithesis of concretion but also its precondition. My commentators are acute on the way explanatory generalization and interpretive particularity intersect in my argument. Given the importance of abstraction in both my method and my account of its historical object, I am grateful to them most of all, perhaps, for the success with which they have evoked the range, variety, and detail of particular kinds of evidence in *The Secret History*, which I adduce not simply for their reciprocal confirmation through accretion and overlay but also, in their local disparities, to thicken and variegate the texture of the abstraction that encloses them. Richard Connors has done a special service by contextualizing my work within an ample and thoughtful selection of studies by others on several of the topics I treat, helpfully documenting the fact that *The Secret History* enters into discussions that well precede it and that often enough diverge from its own claims and conclusions.

I now turn to clarification. In breaking down the middle term of my triad, “separation,” in the first part of *The Secret History*, I rely on the notion of a “devolution of absolutism” whereby the public, sovereign authority that is tacitly and unconditionally a possession of absolute monarchy is gradually detached from monarchy and associated with a number of lesser, relatively more “private” entities. John Smail identifies the major contenders — representative democracy, self-interest, the household, the

economy, the family, women, the ethical subject or “sovereign self,” conscience, the imagination, sex — with a cogency that not only separates them on a spectrum of increasing privatization and internalization but also is mindful of their analogical ties to one another. In the third part of *The Secret History*, I focus on a major literary enactment of this devolution from the realm of traditional publicness to the emergent realm of multiple privacies, the emergence of the (domestic) novel in the eighteenth century. In the second part of my study, I propose a framework for understanding the domestic novel as the formal product of seventeenth-century modifications of the genre of the secret history, a formal change that reflects more general transformations in hermeneutic and pedagogic method.

“Domestication” is the term I use to denote the tendency in all traditional modes of textual interpretation to use the “low,” trivial, but familiar categories of local, personal, and common experience as a means of signifying or accommodating the momentous, “elevated,” but therefore scarcely accessible signifiers of public — of political and theological — teaching. “Domesticity” is the term I use to denote the end point of the interpretive process of domestication, a point of reversal whereby sufficient value is acknowledged to reside in the immanence of “low” experience itself to give it the status of its own signified and to preclude altogether the necessity of low-to-high signification. Smail is right to see this change as, broadly speaking, an example of the historical devolution of absolutism. It is important to add, however, that strictly speaking domestication is not a fluid historical process but a stabilizing technique of reading and teaching, not an engine of devolution but a bulwark against it. Because domestication is thus grounded in a hierarchical subordination of the “low” to the “high,” only at the notional moment when the value system of domestication is replaced by that of domesticity can we see, as it were retrospectively, domestication as authorizing the devolution of an absolute norm from high to low, from the public to the private realm of experience.

Lisa Cody concentrates her attention on the more private and interiorized stages of the devolution of absolutism, in particular the categories of subjectivity and the imagination and “the ‘secret’ of sex,” and she thoughtfully extends my speculations on the shifting relationship between “secrecy” and “privacy” during the early modern period. It might seem paradoxical, Cody observes, that the capacity for imaginative identification with another person should become normative (through writers like Adam Smith and Jane Austen) at a time when the fundamental difference between individuals and especially the sexes was also becoming conventional wisdom. In explaining this paradox, Cody illuminates the crucial dialectic of modern conflation, which became possible only when traditionally distinct categories had come to appear sufficiently separable from each other to be autonomous entities and therefore conflatable.

The emergent authority of “sex” at this time can appear inflated if we treat it as the single standard-bearer of modern privacy rather than as one part of a greater whole. To isolate sex as *the* secret, that is, risks obscuring its status as only one component — oppositionally separated most importantly from political and economic self-interest — in the more general category of human desire, whose positive revaluation during the Enlightenment must appear counterintuitive to those who believe postmodern thought is the antithesis of Enlightenment thinking. In fact, Cody does justice to the co-implication of sex with other categories of desire, centrally the imagination. In her bold extension of my reading of Campi’s Martha and Mary painting, Cody documents the semantic plasticity of “the imagination,” “sex,” and “the subject” a century-and-a-half before the first is positively revalued as a faculty beyond both sin and the senses, the second becomes naturalized as sex “as such,” and the third sheds its primary association with subjection and takes on the modern colouring of subjectivity.

The subdivision of “desire” into sex, interest, the imagination, secrecy, privacy, and the like evokes a process I argue is evident in much of the history with which I am concerned and that Weil lucidly explains — namely, the tendency of categories, once separated into their public and private components, to replicate within the new realm of privacy a further subdivision of the sort that gave rise to it. An especially arresting instance of this, a species of privacy that devolves from absolute sovereignty, is the Habermasian category “the public” — not the traditional publicness of royal state rule, but that of the public sphere, public opinion, the public interest, the reading public, the public domain, the republic of letters — a collectively imagined or virtual realm through which private individuals exercise actual political and cultural power. To Weil’s discussion I would add only that the emergence of this innovative category of virtual publicness depended on the simultaneous and reciprocal emergence of the equally unprecedented notion of privacy itself. For “traditional” communities, authority is a top-down affair that begins with God or monarch and is exercised on the relatively undifferentiated mass of commoners who, in a condition of privation rather than privacy, are subjected to it. By the end of the eighteenth century, authority instead derived increasingly from an indefinite multiplicity of actual individuals, political and ethical subjects, whose manifold private desires it was the job of virtual publics (not only the public sphere but also, notably, representative political bodies and the market) to accommodate and reconcile. If explanatory schemes — like my “devolution of absolutism” (or contemporaries’ “state versus civil society”) — are needed to generate interpretable examples, the particularity of examples is reciprocally needed to sharpen the adequacy of explanation.

As Smail observes, *The Secret History* is a historical investigation of how nothing less than epistemology, or modes of knowing, developed in this

period, which is one reason why the “disciplinary” scope of its analysis needs to be as wide as it is. But if epistemology is germane not only to what we would call philosophy but also to economics, religion, political theory, literature, science, and the like, epistemology itself owes its explanatory power to its relatively recent separation and autonomization — its explicitation — as a privileged window onto the world. The modern authority of epistemology expresses a profound readjustment of focus from the *a priori* premise that the existence of fundamental categories is given, to the empirical process by which their existence makes a claim on our attention. This is a shift from the “what” to the “how,” from the object to the subject, but it also revalues “objecthood,” if not as presupposed as first principle, then as the crucial evidentiary basis for empirically derived suppositions. The discipline of history comes into its own when it embraces the methodological requirement that knowledge of the past be grounded in “texts” whose objectivity, even in the most inclusive sense of that term, is also a function of subjective interpretation — that is, interpretation by a subject.

Although to different degrees, two of my commentators raise a question that is central to historical method as such, but is made perhaps more than usually pressing by the way I proceed in *The Secret History*. This is the question of what Smail calls “intent and causation” and Weil calls “causality and agency.” For Smail, problems might be said to arise in relation to the fact that *The Secret History* is an intellectual history, focused on the way contemporaries think about or “know” the political, social, and economic world they inhabit, and is therefore limited, by this focus, to the analysis of written texts that are representative and expressive of that worldly experience but not causally instrumental in bringing it about. For Weil, problems coalesce around the frequency and explicitness with which I recur to abstract formulations that appear to explain historical change by reference to the agency of nothing more concrete or explanatory than conceptual categories or thought itself. These misgivings go to the heart of my project and invite a return to the heuristic distinction between explanation and interpretation.

At one extreme, the question of causation is one of abstract and external determination; at the other, it is one of concrete and internal agency, intent, and motive, and both Smail and Weil wonder whether, in their locality and particularity, the latter tend to fly under the radar of my procedure. Yet if that procedure involves a methodological reciprocity of the general and the particular of the sort I have described, one would expect that matters of individual agency would be voiced with some frequency in *The Secret History*, and I think they are. Weil’s framing account of Queen Anne’s female favourites rightly reminds us that contemporaries construed the public/private divide “in accordance with political needs.” Here and elsewhere, however, I assume readers will know that the porosity of that divide, witnessed in a wealth of particular encounters, was exploited by

many contemporaries for reasons of power and self-interest. It is also important to see not only that the general fact of the divide's porosity cannot be explained at this local level of political and personal motive, but also that our assumptions about political and personal motive may be skewed if detached from the broad cultural phenomenon of a highly experimental approach to the public-private relationship. Citing my defence of Jane Austen's domesticity, Weil asks whether Mary Wollstonecraft therefore should be challenged for "condemning the narrowness of the education and life course open to middle-class women." For Wollstonecraft, however, domesticity — the condition of "affectionate wives and rational mothers" — is, if anything, responsible not for the problem of a narrow female education but for its mitigation. To assess the attitudes of contemporaries toward the emergent institution of domesticity we may need to attend less to historical hindsight and more to the status of women that domesticity would replace — in Wollstonecraft's account, the status of "alluring mistresses" (see *The Secret History*, p. 187). Smail's question about agency — was Eliza Haywood consciously "driving forward the processes of domestication and devolution" that were subserved by her local actions? — seems to me both interesting and unanswerable in its own terms. What sort of language would support this reading of active agency, as opposed to the view that Haywood was passively "picking up on currents in the culture around her"? Is the dichotomous form of the question perhaps a hindrance rather than a help in getting at how individuals inhabit transitional cultures?

What about the other extreme of causation, that of abstract and external determination? Throughout *The Secret History* there runs an uneven but continuous analogy between the modern division of knowledge and the modern division of labour. Laying out the terms of my argument (pp. xviii–xix), I propose (with Marx) that the history I will pursue is the history both of abstract conceptual categories and of concrete material experience and practice, and that the development and complication of the latter is the precondition for the recognition and articulation of the former. For the most part, however, Smail and Weil are right to see that my interest in the divisions of knowledge and labour concerns less their causal or explanatory relationship than the balance of similarity and difference that is evident in their analogical or structural relationship (for example, pp. 325–327). Noting my micro-causal thesis that James I's warning to Parliament against looking into the limits of his power led Parliament to do just that, Smail advances toward the sort of macro-level question that I tend to avoid: "But why does James warn in the first place?" Citing my metaphorical account of how the tradition of "domestication" is succeeded by the innovation of "domesticity," Weil suspects that the macro-causal question is "answered" here on the level of words or concepts, not history. These are fair complaints. I shy away from such questions in part because I think the ultimate determinacy of the material

over the conceptual, or vice versa, is an ontological and a political conviction that is fundamentally insusceptible to empirical demonstration. But my reluctance to propose macro-causal explanations also owes to the fact that the availability of the causal formulation itself — which explains which, social being or consciousness? — is a product of the great process of “separation out” that is my topic in *The Secret History* and that is intertwined with other modern divisions, like that between explanation and interpretation, quantity and quality, science and the humanities, and the like. (As in the case of the public and the private, of course, in all of these instances the modern separations derive from earlier distinctions. In their insistence they also replace earlier determinacies, like that of the creature by the Creator or of flesh by spirit, that were ceasing to exert their erstwhile explanatory force.) In other words, I am reluctant to ask, let alone to answer, the macro-causal question because to do so would be to deploy too quickly and easily a habit of inquiry whose delicate emergence into the realm of the plausible at this time it is my ambition to throw into relief.

As Smail implies, my denial of any “chronology” to the major developments I take up in Part I of *The Secret History* aims to obviate a thesis of *propter hoc* causal determinacy based on *post hoc* temporal difference. To my mind, this is not to deny as well “the possibility of any contingent relationships between these developments.” On the contrary, the multiple interdependence of things tends to flourish most openly in the absence of a single and overarching scheme of dependence. Of the conflationary responses to the modern separation of the material and the conceptual that are formulated soon after the period of my concern, Marx’s dialectical method seems to me best able to sustain the relatively new-found authority of material causation without sacrificing the apprehension of historical contingency that is the most valuable product of the separation of the material from the conceptual.

What remains, once causal explanation is bracketed, is analogical relationship. For contemporaries, the dense thicket of analogical relation, grounded in the emergent relation of matter and concept, labour and knowledge, connects the multiplicity of phenomena within the domains that we separate out as society, politics, economy, religion, family, gender, and sex. On one hand, this way of thinking sustains an early modern ontology of correspondence that has much in common with the traditional culture of distinction-without-separation. On the other hand, the insight of analogical relation has a valuable lesson to teach modern historians, we who work and think in a culture of separability. Weil suggests this with gratifying point when she says that I “put issues of domesticity and privacy that gender historians tend to think of as being *about* gender into a wider political and historical context. It is healthy and challenging to be reminded that the categories of public and private did not, or not just, come into being as weapons in a class or gender-political

struggle.” This is the best justification, I think, for the mode of history (like *The Secret History*) that has been largely denigrated as that of the “master narrative.” If they work as they should, master narratives are neither random heaps of facts nor monological reductions of multiplicity to simplicity, but stories told with enough detail to render moot the question of whether this is one story or many.

Michael McKeon  
*Rutgers University*