What makes a history of the private self so difficult to write is the complicated interrelationship between the two categories “history” and “private” in the self-understandings of modern subjects. Perhaps the most familiar formulation of the relationship between “history” and “private” is one of opposition. In this case, history is taken to be a marauding force that invades private spaces. The ideological reach of modern revolution is a particularly compelling example. George Steiner puts particular stress on the French Revolution, a “millenial” event, in his view, because it abolished “barriers between common life and the enormities of the historical.” “The attempts to institute on earth ‘kingdoms of justice,’ to legislate the messianic in secular terms,” he explains, ended with the destruction, “so far as we can tell permanently,” he adds, of the “spaces and temporalities of private, personal consciousness.” “Under the stress of political totality, the individual can no longer hear himself think.”\(^1\) In this reading, history acts as a self-evident force that finally accomplished a mobilization of interior spaces in the name of political loyalty and social control. A second, more subtle formulation retains the opposition of “history” and “private” but emphasizes the recognition of historical processes in modernity by which subjects name events as historical, thereby enabling them to see the circumstances of their lives in terms of development and displacement and, as a result, promoting the personal cultivation of a notional shelter called home. The private is not abolished by, but rather resists history in cultivated, ordinary rhythms in which the self is safely kept. For example, Christina Crosby, in her book on *Victorians and the women’s question*, puts into play both “the time of Hegel and the angel

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in the house … the progress of history and the fallen women.” In her view, the knowledge of the rigors of historical transformation are compensated by the closed-off privacy of home and the nurturing love of women. Home is furnished in the search for peace, its abundance an index of the pressures from the outside. In this authoritative economy, men are public and historical while women are private and timeless. In the modern trans-Atlantic West, the increasingly definitive imagination of historical time and the advancement of self-consciousness, subjectivity, and action in and through historical time, has the consequence of pushing “others,” whether women or the non-West or the traditional or the “premodern,” into a non-historical and in some ways un-self-conscious space. The contours of modern history flattens them completely out. Throughout the nineteenth century, history was repeatedly produced in opposition to a non-historical other.

However, the idea that the private is constituted in the West as a place outside of history is inadequate because it is too absolute. A third way that the relationship between “history” and the “private” has been formulated is to regard the private as the very marker of the various contexts of historical periodization so that it is precisely household inventories and everyday manners that express the particularity of a historical period. The site of Pompeii, for example, captured the nineteenth-century imagination precisely because the intact ordinariness of the site embodied the difference of the Stavian cities in the year 79. It offered a glimpse into domestic lives as they “actually were,” in the words of Germaine de Stael, and offered a compelling argument for proveniencing recovered relics rather than carting off to Rome or Naples exemplary specimens. Again and again, the “age of the spirit of the age,” as James Chandler nicely puts it for the 1820s and 1830s, took account of households to describe the spirit of the age and to index both chronological change over time and cultural difference across space. The duty of the observer in the historical age, wrote Washington Irving, was to “cope with the people in all their conditions, and all their habits and humours.” It was at the “convivial table” and around the

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